

Disclaimer: I own nothing of Harry Potter and everything recognizable belongs to J K Rowling.

Summary: In an alternate universe Harry Potter grows up having a twin and with his parents alive. It all goes well until the Potters were attacked on Halloween 1981 and his brother Karl is proclaimed by the media as the 'Boy Who Lived' when they are informed that he vanquished Voldemort. Karl is pampered to no end while Harry is treated by everyone as the reclusive and powerless brother of the Boy-Who-Lived. At school, as well as he did at home, Karl basks in his assumed superiority over his brother and shuns him. The rest of the school follows his example except for the clumsy Neville Longbottom, who's Karl Potter's second favorite victim.

Now, fourteen years later, Harry and Karl are in their fifth year. While Karl is prepared and trained to fulfill his destiny and kill Voldemort, Harry and his only friend, Neville Longbottom, try to make it through the final steps of their education before they turn seventeen and can leave the prejudiced, biased and hypocrite Wizarding Britain behind as well as the war that has recently started again. But whatever universe he's in, things don't ever tend to go according to plan for Harry Potter, especially if a meddlesome and scheming Headmaster takes a sudden interest in him when some of his unexpected abilities are discovered.

Warnings: Rated T for some swearing language and for some scenes with a bit of violence at the end of the first book (the fic will be constituted by two books). Will be warned beforehand in those. This is also not a slash story. The main characters are Harry and Neville but the only bond they have is that of friendship.

TO KNOW YOUR ENEMY,

by blaugrana-al-vent

Chapter 1: The Way My Life Was (Childhood)

Fifteen year old Harry Potter was lying flat on his back in his bed, eyes wide open, as night came to its end, succumbing to the first sunrays of the day. He had just experienced the same nightmare that had haunted his sleep since... well always. A maniac's laughter, a cold voice, and then, green light and pain beyond anything imaginable. It was always like that. Though this dream didn't appear

every night, it came back again and again, with a month's difference or a week's in between, but it always came back, as if it wanted to be remembered for all of Harry's life. When he was younger he had told his parents, James and Lily, about it, but they always gave him the same answer. 'It may be the night when your brother Karl saved us all by vanquishing You-Know-Who. We know it must have been a traumatic experience. Go back to sleep.' It was always like that. All in the Potter household revolved around Karl Potter. In fact, all in the British Wizarding Community seemed to revolve around him, the vanquisher of Lord Voldemort, the worse Dark Lord the world had suffered since Gellert Grindelwald. The 'Boy-Who-Lived', they used to call his brother, who greatly enjoyed the fame, as well as his parents, who enjoyed showing off his son and the scar he had gained in his arm in the confrontation.

Harry had asked countless times how they knew Karl had been the one to do it, but it had always been interpreted as a sign of jealousy towards his younger brother, so eventually he stopped asking. Although James and Lily obviously favoured Karl, they did not mistreat their other son in any physical way. It was all psychological. They only had eyes for Karl. The 'Boy-Who-Lived' had the bigger room; always got more food, got more presents, and more importantly he got more attention, much more than any kid should get. The few times in which one of their parents had mistaken him for his brother, who was his identical twin, were the times he had felt closer to be truly loved. These scarce occurrences were followed by an awkward moment when they realised he was Harry, just Harry, not Karl. They would usually mutter something under their breaths and walk away without talking to him.

Harry felt as he was the black sheep of the family, but he didn't even know what he had done to deserve it. Well, he did know, although it had been Karl who had triggered the situation by 'unknowingly' defeating Voldemort, and making Harry's life worse by gathering more and more of their parents' attention. Far from being dumb, Karl used cleverly every possible situation to attract more attention from anyone, and undermining Harry's attempts to be recognized by his family. It started with small and trivial situations, such as when they were still very young. Karl would start crying and throwing a temper tantrum for the slightest thing when he saw that his 'inferior than him' brother was getting too much attention. With time, the situation escalated, as did their mutual hate. Harry remembered clearly the first time when he had felt intense hatred towards him.

## Flashback

The two brothers ran excitedly down the stairs towards the kitchen after they heard Lily's breakfast call. Today was their eighth birthday and they were as excited as every eight year old can be, knowing that today they would receive a large amount of presents. Well, Harry wasn't excited by that fact, as he knew he would get very little presents, compared to his brother. The fact that got Harry excited was that, finally, he was old enough to ride a proper broom. Until then he had only flown in kid's brooms, which had limited speed and altitude, and it was impossible to perform any acrobatics in them. But now, as their mother had promised two years ago, they could fly them. Harry was eager to show his parents, especially his father, how good he was on a broom. That would certainly catch his eye and make him pay more attention to him. Harry knew he was good because he had borrowed James' racing broom in the middle of the night many times. As had Karl. After seeing Harry sneak off one night into Potter Manor's grounds and fly around with James broom, he had done the same many nights. He was not amused when he found out that Harry could outfly him so easily, so he resolved to teach him a lesson.

"Happy birthday Karl!" exclaimed both parents when they entered. "And you too Harry." they added in a more bored tone.

"So where are my presents?" Karl asked.

James let out a soft chuckle and ruffled his son's hair. "Now, now, son, we have to wait for Uncle Peter and Uncle Padfoot."

"When are they coming?"

"Right now." said a voice from behind the boy. Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew had arrived through the Floo and had made themselves at home, not even bothering to announce their arrival right away.

"Happy birthday Karl." said Peter and then added Harry in the same bored and forced voice that his parents. Sirius at least had the decency to say 'boys' and not 'Karl'. That was why Harry liked him so much. He was his godfather and no matter what, Sirius divided

his attention equally between the twins, which was all that Harry could ask for.

"So can I get them now?" Karl continued.

"Let's go to the living room." said Lily giving in to her son's pleas.

Karl instantly bolted out of the room, Harry following at a slower pace. Then came Sirius, and after him Peter with both Potters. Harry saw the pile of presents beside the fireplace. He knew that most of them were Karl's and he would be lucky if he got more than just one from Sirius and another one from his parents. They started unwrapping packages. Karl opened whatever package he got his hands into, not bothering to check the nametag, as most of them seemed to be addressed to him anyway. Harry spent more time looking for his, which were scarce, and appreciating the Quidditch book Sirius had given him. Finally there was only one unopened package from the pile left. It was rectangular, about one and a half meters long, and half meter wide and deep. This had to be his new broom! Harry thought enthusiastically. He grabbed it eagerly and then he saw the name tag. Karl Potter. His previous eagerness and excitement disappeared. He sat there staring at the tag with a confused and then hurt look. He didn't even notice his brother grabbing the present from his hands. He just sat there, not moving, his gaze never leaving the space where moments ago Karl's new broom had been. After a few moments he recovered. He turned towards his brother and saw him take a new Nimbus 1900 from the box. Sirius saw how Harry looked at his brother and the Nimbus. He noticed with a sad look that no broom was to be seen beside Harry's small pile of presents, if two gifts actually formed a pile. He would be having a few words with Lily and James after that.

"But mum, where is my broom?" Harry asked glancing between her and Karl with a sad look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry dear. But brooms are very expensive, so we thought you should share with Karl."

"WHAT?" a voice echoed from the back of the room. It wasn't Harry's though, who had every right to be angry. They had told him he would get a broom, but they had broken their promise. It was Karl's voice which had boomed around the living room. He was outraged at having to share his new broom with Harry.

The raven haired boy paid him no attention as he left and run to his room, his eyes prickling as a warning that tears were coming. For once he wasn't angry at his brother. Well, yes he was, but Harry was even angrier at his parents, so Karl's rant didn't seem too important to listen to. They said that the broom was for them to share. Then why was it addressed to Karl instead of the two of them? Why had his brother gotten a broom polishing kit and a certified Nimbus wooden plaque were he could hang it? The damned broom even had Karl's name engraved in it. He dropped into his bed and started crying. This was his worst birthday ever. He should have seen it coming. Things like this usually happened to him, while his brother got anything he wanted, whenever he wanted. A soft knock in his door interrupted his sobbing.

"Go away!" he shouted. The person at the other side didn't comply and opened the door. Harry was about to shout again at the intruder but stopped himself when he saw his godfather Sirius, standing at the door. He was the person whom he loved most, and probably, the only person to love him back.

"Oh, sorry Uncle Sirius. I thought you were..." he stuttered, embarrassedly wiping away tears from his eyes though they continued to stream freely out of his eyes.

"Are you okay pup?" Harry just stared at him for a moment before turning away to hide his tears. "Okay, stupid question, sorry. Come here." he said while sitting beside Harry and pulling him into a tight hug. Harry's sobs became louder after he embraced his godfather.

"Why do they hate me so much?" he asked when he had relaxed a little.

"They don't... hate you."

"They don't love me either."

"Yes they do."

"No they don't! All they care about is Karl!"

"They also care about you, Harry."

"Stop saying that! They don't care about me. I know! They all pay attention to him only. They don't notice me most of the time!" Sirius knew all of this was true, and didn't know what to say to comfort the small child, so he just held him while the kid just took all of his frustration out. "They promised they would buy me a broom. They know how much I like flying! And then they buy Karl one. They say we will share it. But I know it's as good as his. He'll let me fly it once today probably because of what they said, but that's it. He won't allow me to ride it anymore!"

"I have an idea." Sirius said suddenly.

"What is it?" Harry asked, his voice weak.

"I always carry this with me. Seeing how much presents Karl got, and that he got a Nimbus 1900, I am giving you a second present." Then he pulled out a small stick from one of the inner pockets of his coat. He took out his wand and pronounced some strange words. Harry thought it might be Latin. Sirius handed the little stick, which was now growing steadily, to his godson. Seconds later, Harry was holding a beautiful black broom in his hands with silver decorations. It seemed old, although it appeared to be in a perfect state.

"This is my second present." Harry gasped. He was about to say something when Sirius cut him off.

"It might not be as cool as one of those Nimbus, but it's much faster."

"Which make is it?"

"None. It was custom made."

"What is custom made?"

"Custom made is when you go and ask a broom maker to make you a broom with specified speed, weight, colour, form or whatever you can think of. Big businesses like Nimbus or Cleansweep make several thousands of identical brooms and sell them. In this broom's case, there's not another one like it. It's unique. My uncle had it made for me when I was your age. I won a few Quidditch matches riding it. It is truly a magnificent broom. So as you are my 'honorary' nephew and life owes you a broom, and a good one at that, I

thought it would be nice if you had it. I don't need it anymore." Harry knew he shouldn't accept it. It was Sirius' broom. It had been for... he really didn't know how many years but it was certainly a large amount of them. He sat there considering what to say until only three words came out of his mouth, or more accurately, they came from his heart.

"Thank you, Sirius!" he said, and jumped at him, embracing him. Sirius smiled and took his godson into another tight hug. He took a peek out the window while holding his grateful godson and saw Karl flying around in his new broom.

"Hey pup. How about we go outside and you fly circles around your brother?"

"Yes!" was all Harry said before grabbing his new broom and running downstairs, across the kitchen, and into the grounds.

He found his dad sitting on the stands of their own private Quidditch Pitch while looking at his beloved son. Harry observed his brother and saw that he wasn't as talented as himself. He smirked. At last, a little recognition along with a personal victory over his brother. A few seconds later arrived Sirius. Only then James seemed to pay attention to anything other than Karl. He noticed that Harry was holding Sirius' broom.

"Hey Padfoot, why does Harry have your broom?"

"It's my broom now." Harry said smiling.

"WHAT? Why are you giving him your broom. It's the only one you've had all your life!"

Sirius took James several feet away before James said anything that would hurt Harry. They spoke heatedly for a few minutes with a silencing charm around them. Harry observed them. Sirius had a murderous look in his eyes while James was arguing about something, as if he was defending himself from Sirius's accusations.

"What's that broom?" Karl sneered from his side. He had just come down and joined Harry in staring at his father and Sirius.

"It's my new broom."

"Got jealous of my new Nimbus so they had to get you an old trinket from the storage room?"

Harry just looked ahead, trying to tune out his brother's taunts. He didn't answer and just smirked. Victory was near. After what seemed hours, James and Sirius came back while Karl went to sit at the bench and started playing around with a training wand Dumbledore had gotten him for his birthday. This seemed to be the perfect moment for Harry to show his father how good he was. After receiving an encouraging smile from Sirius, he took off carefully, taking in every sensation the new broom gave him. He flew slowly a couple of laps around the pitch to get used to the new broom. When he felt more comfortable he started gaining speed. Then it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He'd never felt anything like that. It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But brooms did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off. Harry tried to fly it down and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. Someone had to be doing something to him, or the broom. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him. In a short moment of peace between the violent movements, he looked down to where Sirius was, and saw his brother hiding from them while pointing his wand at him. He was jinxing Harry's broom! Slowly, but inevitably he lost height irregularly until he crashed into the stands with a sickening crunch. He felt pain erupt in his right arm. He took a look and saw he had a deep gash in his forearm, but at least he had nothing broken. Tears started streaming from his eyes as he saw that Sirius' broom had broken in many pieces.

It had all gone wrong. He was supposed to show off in front of his father and he had ended up breaking the best present of his life. And it was, again, Karl's fault. He looked up and saw Karl retreating quickly with his broom towards the house, his alibi, without doubt, and James and Sirius running towards him. He noticed his godfather first, who was following James. He was looking at Harry with genuine concern and worry. But then Harry looked at his father. He was looking at Harry with genuine anger and disappointment. What was going to happen wouldn't be nice. So he stood up, clutching tightly his right arm and took off to the Manor, running while he cried.



## End Flashback

Many episodes like that had followed in the following years, and Harry learned how to avoid them for fear of his life. At the Muggle School they attended until they were ready to go to Hogwarts, Harry lived a similar situation. Karl had a wide collection of friends while Harry remained isolated. Many boys that had played with him in the playground the first days had been beaten by Karl and his little gang, so they didn't dare to come near him again.

Life at home was equally tense. The obvious difference of attention that both brothers received from their parents made Harry distance himself more and more from them. It wasn't that his parents didn't care about him, because they did, only not in the same way as Karl. They cared that he got good grades; they cared about him if he was ill or they cared about his social life when he preferred to stay in his room alone when great Karl Potter had his birthday party downstairs and many children his age were having fun. But what really annoyed Harry to the point of hating them as much as he hated his brother was that they didn't care about him when important things came up or, his brother was involved. When they had to choose between them, Karl was always the first and obvious choice. He was the first to be believed when he accused Harry of doing something he had done, he would always get better and more presents. When Harry did accidental magic, James and Lily always turned to congratulate their younger son, Karl, without even knowing who had done it. Harry felt as if he was a family pet that didn't warrant the same attention and love from his parents as their beloved son. He felt as if he was the black sheep of his family.

Slowly, after beginning to understand that the situation wasn't likely to change anytime soon, he started to distance himself from them. In this situation he turned to the only person he cared for, his godfather Sirius. The dog animagus had told him countless times that he had lived a similar situation at home when he was young, having only his uncle to turn to.

Unfortunately Sirius was no longer welcome at the Potter household. After the broom incident, Sirius had accused Karl of jinxing Harry's broom and accused Lily and James of favouring Karl while they neglected Harry. Harry remembered the argument well; he had hid behind the door and heard the row completely. Well, almost

completely. He had arrived halfway through and knew that something must have been said by one of them to create such a tense atmosphere. One way or another, Harry was grateful that Sirius had come to his defence. He felt as if he was in debt with him.

The falling apart between Sirius and his parents did not stop Harry from seeing his godfather though. Usually Sirius would meet him outside school and walk him home, although they didn't always follow the most direct or fastest route back. They would always spend a couple of hours around Muggle Godric's Hollow before getting Harry home. In case his parents ever asked why he it took him so long to come back from school, he would say he had stayed back in the school's library. Had they really known him, they would have detected his lie thereupon, as Harry didn't like reading very much. Harry preferred experiencing to reading. During their daily visits to the muggle world Harry and Sirius realised how much more advanced Muggles were and they were soon fairly knowledgeable of their customs. Sirius was particularly fascinated with two Muggle inventions: vehicles and cell phones. The last few months of the last year at Muggle School before he went to Hogwarts, Sirius would come and fetch him in his brand new Harley Davidson. He had magically enhanced it and would normally take Harry flying, a thing he definitely liked.

Whenever they couldn't see each other, as in holidays or such, they would usually exchange text messages. They had come to the right conclusion that this muggle system was far more practical and efficient than owls, and thanks to magic they would be using them for free. Of course Harry kept it a secret from his family and had the cell silenced at all times. Sirius would usually send Harry many birthday and Christmas gifts every year, although he knew that James always snatched them out of Harry's hands and disposed of them, and if they were valuable sold them or gave them to Karl. Neither Sirius or his presents to Harry were welcome at Potter Manor. However, Karl always got to keep whatever Sirius had sent him.

Peter Pettigrew had chosen to stick with the Potters when he had to choose between his two long life friends after their falling apart. Pettigrew, instead of ignoring Harry much like Harry's parents and brother did, he seemed to hate Harry for some reason and was always observing him. His parents didn't notice it so Harry would

never discover why he was hated by the man unless he confronted him about it.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!

## Chapter 2: The Way My Life Was (First years in Hogwarts)

When their eleventh birthday finally came, Harry and his brother got their Hogwarts letters. Their parents were ecstatic at the idea of their precious son going to Hogwarts and were soon explaining him all about their time there. Harry saw with an upset, but resigned look as his father discreetly passed on his old Invisibility Cloak to Karl when Lily wasn't looking. Sirius had told him everything about it, and Harry had even located inside an old trunk in the basement of Potter Manor. Harry hoped that his father wouldn't remember about it so he could get it the night before boarding the express so his father wouldn't know he had it, but unfortunately he had. Harry could have stolen it, but he had nowhere to hide it properly, and he feared what might happen if his father decided to summon it and realised Harry had stolen it. Something like that had happened a couple of years ago when Harry had 'stolen' James' old broom, which he didn't fly anymore. James had wondered where it was, and when it came flying from Harry's room as a result of a summoning charm Harry got the biggest punishment ever.

However, the night of his birthday, he received a letter from Sirius which helped him lighten up a little bit after having lost the Cloak to his brother. Inside the envelope Harry found a congratulating letter from his Godfather along with a copy of the Marauders' Map. It was a Map that the Marauders had created in their school years but it had been unfortunately confiscated by Mr. Filch in their seventh year. Sirius had created another one for him; updated with a few rooms and locations they hadn't discovered or bothered to draw when they made it, as well as a spell to avoid appearing in it or in other devices with a similar objective. The password to open it had been changed from 'I solemnly swear I'm up to no good' to 'Karl Potter is the biggest prat ever.' The closing password had been maintained as a tribute to the group.

Harry was heartbroken when Sirius told him that his cell phone wouldn't work inside Hogwarts and they wouldn't be able to communicate other than the ordinary owl mail.

.o0o.

When they got to the school on the first of September, Karl got sorted into Gryffindor as if it followed a script. The Sorting Hat had cried out Gryffindor as soon as the Hat touched Karl's head. Harry

was the great shock for the Hogwarts students and faculty when they realised that the Boy-Who-Lived had a twin brother, and that he was sorted into Hufflepuff, although that didn't surprise his family. They had always thought of him as a weakling. Personally he thought it fitted him perfectly. Helga Hufflepuff's House was known for its member's loyalty to their friends and their hard work. Harry had to work hard to get anything he wanted, and he was really loyal to those, or rather to the one, that had offered him a friendship. Karl wasted no time to make fun of Harry for being a 'Puff', as well as he wasted no time to start bullying Neville Longbottom, who had once crashed clumsily into The-Boy-Who-Lived while in front of many photographers making him look like an idiot.

Neville had also been sorted into Hufflepuff, so he and Harry became friends after meeting each other in the dorms. They shared their hate for Karl, who had made them the social nobodies of the school. They kept to themselves and spent all of their time together, quite contempt to ignore and be ignored by the rest of the Hogwarts population. Their housemates, who proudly affirmed that loyalty was the main trait of their House, didn't dare cross the Boy-Who-Lived and left the boys alone.

During the school year, Karl had continued to harvest a great amount of fans and attention. He used his saviour status to get all he wanted, and Dumbledore, who wanted at all costs to have the 'Boy-Who-Lived' under his control, granted everything the young Gryffindor requested. That way, Karl managed to enter the Gryffindor Quidditch team during his first year as a Chaser, following his father's footsteps. The magnificent trio of Chasers that had won them the last two Quidditch Cups, formed by Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell, would have to be dissolved so Karl could play. The difficult decision of who of the three girls had to leave the team was to be made by Oliver Wood. He and the rest of the team, who had formed a deep bond over the last two years, were cholerick. After having appealed to McGonagall, who was equally upset for the situation, yet unable to do anything, they all decided to leave the Quidditch Team. All of them. That did not amuse Karl, who quickly gained six new enemies. Luckily for the Gryffs, McGonagall stepped in when Dumbledore was about to give Karl the Captain position. She held tryouts herself and picked the players as well as the captain. The result was a competitive team with Karl as the leading Chaser, although it didn't even come close to the previous one.

During the school year Harry and Neville got to know the Weasley twins. They had backed them up when they saw that the git that had ruined their Quidditch team was harassing them. After a brief altercation, they all got detentions, well, all of them except Karl, of course. They hit it off immediately while they 'cleaned' the Trophy Room despite Harry and Neville's shyness and lack of self-esteem. They became like older brothers to them despite being in another house. They looked out for them and even kept them out of their pranks. Thanks to that, both boys gained some confidence and lost many of their previous shyness. Much to Harry's amusement they had nicked the original Marauders' Map from Filch's office during their first year and worked out how to use it. He chose to keep it quiet that he knew who the Marauders', their heroes, were, at least for the time being.

At the end of their first year, Neville and Harry managed to make it to the top ten students of their year. They could proudly affirm that through their high marks they had contributed with a considerable amount of points to their house. Hufflepuff wouldn't be finishing the last one that year, as his brother and his gang had lost vast amounts of points for Gryffindor who was last. But even then, Karl couldn't be seen losing the House Cup, their third place in the Quidditch Cup had been too much of a disappointment for his brother and fans, so Dumbledore saw to it by adding a ridiculous amount of points to his brother and friends for supposedly saving the Philosopher's Stone from Voldemort, who had somehow come back from the dead. Of course, by the time Dumbledore assigned this extra points there were many rumours spread across the school about what had really happened. Some supported Karl's version, which was also Dumbledore's, which was an exaggerated account of the events. Some other rumours said that Karl had been knocked out and that Dumbledore had been the one to deal with the not-so-dead Dark Lord.

The next year passed in the same fashion. Harry and Neville would work hard and get good grades, and while Karl's were as good as theirs, he had Dumbledore tutoring him all year long, and many teachers chose to ignore Karl's continuous cheating in the final exams.

During that second year, it was discovered that Weasley's younger sister, Ginny, was the one opening the Chamber of Secrets. When it

was proved that it had been her she was sent directly to Azkaban. All the Weasley family had trouble believing it. All of them excepting the twins ended up giving in to the evidence Dumbledore provided. Fred and George were the only ones in the family who defended her. They nearly got arrested when they tried to attack the group of Aurors that were escorting her out of the school. After that episode they distanced themselves from their family just as Harry had done so many years ago.

At the end-of-year feast Dumbledore awarded, again, enough points to the lions for 'catching the culprit' so they would win the House Cup again. Although it wasn't really known who had discovered Ginny, Karl had taken the merits for it. Moreover, and much to Harry's irritation, the Ministry awarded his brother an Order of Merlin Third Class for apprehending the culprit.

It was during this year that Harry discovered he was a Parselmouth. He remembered the episode quite well.

Flashback

At seven o'clock one evening Neville and Harry hurried to the Great Hall. Tonight was the first meeting of the Dueling Club that Professor Dumbledore had started at Lockhart's request. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black and most of the school's students seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited. Harry got extremely annoyed when he saw James and Lily among all the parents that had come to see their children. They smiled warmly at his twin and only gave Harry a rather distant and cold nod of acknowledgement.

After quite an amusing demonstration duel between Lockhart and Snape, where the former was humiliated by the Potions Master, the students got paired up to have a little practice. Snape, true to his malicious self, paired up Karl with his nemesis, Draco Malfoy. Harry and Neville's knowledge of spells and curses was limited to the standard spells they learned in DADA classes, apart from a couple more hexes they had looked up after being under their effects at the hand of Karl Potter. They dueled slowly, throwing one spell at a time and when it had been dodged, reflected or caught with some part of their bodies they fired the next one. It looked quite pathetic in fact,

but that was the skill that second years had at Hogwarts, save for Malfoy, who had been taught how to duel by his father, and Karl who had been receiving dueling classes from the finest duelers around the world for the past four years.

After a few accidents happened in the duels between the lower years, Lockhart climbed to the golden stage.

"I think I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells," he said to his public. "Let's have a volunteer pair. Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy, how about you?"

"I have a better idea." said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. He had seen them duel for a while and knew that Potter outclassed Draco. He wanted to save him the humiliation from being defeated by a Potter, let alone a Gryffindor, in front of the whole school. His eyes landed on Harry while looking for someone to duel Potter. The boy paled. Snape had hated his guts since he had started Hogwarts because of his resemblance to his father and brother. Snape smirked. It would be amusing to see how he fared against the Brat-Who-Lived. "How about a fraternal duel between the Potter twins." he announced to the Hall with a twisted smile.

"I accept!" Karl declared proudly, getting the support from all Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and most Ravenclaws.

When the cheering died down all eyes fell upon Harry. He felt overwhelmed by the sudden massive attention. He felt his body paralyze. Neville looked at him and shook his head slightly, begging Harry to back off. He certainly didn't want to duel his brother, he wasn't stupid. He would lose badly. Karl was probably the best dueler of their year thanks to his private classes.

"Well?" said Snape.

"I... err..." he stammered without really knowing what to say to avoid the duel without looking like a coward.

"Of course he will." said James Potter coming near them. He wasn't going to let Harry bring shame to the Potters by backing away from a duel. He may not be a Gryffindor but James would not let a member of his family chicken out from a duel.



"Father, please...I..." said Harry in a low and desperate voice only him could hear.

"You will duel your brother, and that's final." James said sternly. Harry looked at his mother for help. He should have known better, he thought as he saw her turn her gaze away.

"Very well then!" said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Karl into the stage as the crowd gathered around it. Their father moved closer to Karl, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Karl smirked. Harry gulped.

"On three you start dueling. Three — two — one — go!" he shouted.

"Serpensortia!" bellowed his brother wasting no time.

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away. Harry stood motionless staring wide eyed at the snake. Oddly, instead of hearing a hissing noise as he had expected, he only heard a clear and understandable voice coming from the serpent. It dawned on him. He could understand her! Oh no! He was a Parseltongue! Karl used Harry's puzzlement and started to throw at him all the variety of curses and hexes he knew. Harry's instincts took over and he started dodging, clumsily but effectively, and when his brother lowered the pace of the duel, managed to fire back some spells occasionally. Thanks to the extra duelling classes with Dumbledore, Karl had the upper hand and managed to stun Harry a few seconds later. He hadn't come out of it unscathed though, as Harry had managed to break his left arm in three different pieces before being stunned.

Harry woke two hours later in the Infirmary with Neville beside him reading a Herbology book. His head ached terribly and felt very tired. Many potion vials lay on his bedside table, all of them empty. He looked around and saw his brother sleeping at the other end of the room. Colin Creevey who had been presumably petrified by Ginny Weasley, Ronald's younger sister, was also there, still to be cured. He turned to his housemate, who wasn't aware that he has awake.

"What happened?" he asked in a hoarse voice, startling his friend who gave a little jump from his seat.

"Hey! You're awake!" he said looking up from his book.

"How long have I been out?"

"A couple of hours. Madam Pomfrey said you might not wake until tomorrow."

"Why? What did that git hit me with?"

"Well let's see..." Neville said grabbing the medical file at the bedside table. "Two Stupefy, a Rictumsempra, an Expelliarmus, and ah, yes, and one Petrificus Totalus."

"How's that possible? I only recall being hit with a stunner before I passed out."

"Mr. Potter, at last, you're awake!" came the voice from the matron who was coming out of her office. "Tell me, how are you feeling?"

"Fine. Well, my head aches a little bit actually." he said while the matron performed some diagnosis spells on him.

"What happened to him? Did I at least manage to land a spell on him?" Harry asked nodding towards his sleeping twin.

"You broke your brother's arm into three different pieces!" announced the matron disapprovingly.

"Good, he deserves it." he replied earning a scornful look.

"It was the Bone-Shattering curse you used just before being stunned." Neville explained.

"Your brother is in for a rough night, Mr. Potter. I had to vanish his broken bones and re-grow them overnight."

Harry shrugged. "So when can I leave?"

"We'll see how you are tomorrow morning. It was quite a big number of spells you were hit with." Madam Pomfrey explained before leaving.

"Neville, how did I get hit with all that? He only hit me once." Harry asked when Madam Pomfrey was out of earshot.

"Harry, after he stunned you and got struck with your curse he went mad and started cursing you while you were laying in the floor, unconscious."

"What did the Professors do about it?" Harry asked outraged.

"Nothing. They only stopped him when he started cursing you. They sent both of you here. I doubt he'll be punished."

Harry turned to glare at his brother.

"And my parents?" he asked angrily.

"I think you should expect a Howler tomorrow morning. When I was finally allowed to come in here to see you, your parents were fawning all over your brother. Your father was especially angry at you because of the curse you used. It was borderline Dark Arts and he wasn't happy about it."

"I only learnt that curse after Karl used it on you!" Harry exploded.

"I know. But you know how your parents act around him. It's as if he can't do anything bad. That snake he conjured, that's even more borderline Dark Arts than what you did. But your father had suspiciously forgotten about it."

Harry's eyes widened. "The snake." he said to himself.

"Yeah, that's what I said. You remember Karl conjuring it don't you?" Neville asked fearing Harry had some sort of amnesia.

"Yes, of course. But Neville! I could understand it. I could hear it talk!" said Harry with a frightened expression.

"What? You're a Par-"

"Shhh!" Harry hissed when Neville had nearly yelled in disbelief. "You don't think I'm turning dark are you?"

"Harry, Parselmouths are born. It's an innate ability and therefore you can't choose it. Don't look at it like a curse. Look at it like a gift. It's yours to do with it what you want. If you ever become dark it will be because you chose to, not because many things you could not control forced you to. And I'll be there alongside you to tell you."

"Thanks mate. I needed to hear that." Harry said seriously, knowing that those words were true and feeling relieved he hadn't been abandoned by his best friend. That was his greatest fear. To be rejected by those he loved. That night he took great joy in hearing his brother's moans while he restored his right arm's bones with Skele-Grow Potion.

End Flashback

During summer that year, James took the post as Transfiguration teacher while her wife took the Charms one. Once this announcement had been made McGonagall and Flitwick, the previous Professors for those subjects, had said to the public that they wanted to work in something other than education while they still could. This was, of course, the official story. The real one, which Harry knew perfectly, was pretty different. His parents became Aurors when they left school and when they had Harry and Karl, Lily stopped working to take care of their children. Then, during the summer between second and third year something happened with Karl. Harry didn't know what it was exactly, but he presumed that Karl had been caught using magic out of school and in front of muggles. James had tried to cover the thing up using his Auror rank, but her boss, one Amelia Bones, had found out and had suspended James from duty for a year. The former Auror, out of a job, went to Dumbledore and demanded him to give him a job. Since James was only competent enough to teach Transfiguration and Dumbledore thought it would be a good thing to control James Potter directly, he offered McGonagall's job. A week later, Lily Potter had come and asked for another job. She wished to be with her family at the school. Dumbledore, for the same reasons he had employed James, gave her the Charms post. Flitwick and McGonagall were forced into an early retirement and the Potters replaced them as the heads of the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Houses. Harry was now more thankful than ever that the Sorting Hat hadn't placed him in one of those Houses.

The following year, two Azkaban inmates broke out of the prison and Dementors were placed around the castle by order of Minister Fudge in favour of ensuring the safety of the 'Boy-Who-Lived'. After an unfortunate incident involving Harry and two Dementors on the train to Hogwarts, they had both researched on them and by the end of the year they were capable of making a weak corporeal Patronus. While Harry's was a huge dog, Neville's was a wolf. Fortunately, no Death eaters came close to the castle, so it was quite a peaceful year, if you didn't take into the account the Dementors patrolling the boundaries of the school. Also during that year, Harry had tried out for the Chaser position in the Hufflepuff team. He was a natural Seeker, but until Diggory graduated or left the team, whichever came first, the spot wouldn't be available. He was confident he could get the Chaser position thanks to his magnificent skill. He was by far the most competent of the contestants. Sadly though, Karl and his friends came by to see the tryouts and suspiciously, Harry's borrowed broom started to fly erratically. He was the first to be discarded despite his protests.

At the end of the year an event occurred that made the Weasley twins hate the Potters even more. They were caught using the Map by James Potter who confiscated it straightaway without even punishing them or telling if they would get it back. Needless is to say, that from the next morning on, Karl Potter was seen carrying around a piece of blank parchment and stopped being caught by the school's Prefects and teachers. The twins were outraged and had to be talked out of hexing any Potter family member. Harry agreed to provide them with another Map if they promised they wouldn't do anything rash against the Potters. They were amazed that he knew the Marauders but they were soon disappointed when they knew that Wormtail was in fact Peter Pettigrew, Moony was Remus Lupin, who was dead and that Prongs was the git's father.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!

### Chapter 3: The Way My Life Was (Fourth Year)

During fourth year, the Triwizard Tournament was reinstated and Karl 'miraculously' entered as the fourth champion. There was confusion in the different houses when Dumbledore announced that Karl had no choice but to participate in the contest. Gryffindor instantly rallied around him, while the Slytherins took Diggory's side. Hufflepuff supported Diggory, and Potter, to a lesser extent. The Ravenclaws remained neutral and gave both of them their full support, saying that they supported Hogwarts above anything else.

Karl got through the first task easily enough and secured the first place. While the staff of the three schools had taken an oath not to help any of the contenders, Dumbledore had already explained in detail every task to Karl over the summer, so he had a clear advantage over his opponents.

After the task with the dragons, there was announced that the school would be hosting a Yule Ball. This did not amuse Harry and Neville, shy as they were. Both of them had already started to take an interest in girls but none had told each other about it until then. While Neville had had a crush on Hannah Abbott for quite some time, Harry had a crush in the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang. While they were still working up their courage to ask them if they would go to the Yule with them, Justin Finch-Fletchey and Diggory asked them if they'd go to the Ball with them before Harry or Neville had the chance to do so. They didn't know if they should feel relieved that they didn't have to make a fool of themselves while asking or angry that they had already agreed to go with someone else. Either way, they both found a date for the Ball. Harry asked a pretty Ravenclaw girl from their year named Riley Wilkinson, blonde hair and stunning grey eyes. Neville went with Luna Lovegood. They all had a good time and Harry even learnt how to dance.

After the Christmas holidays, the second task came and the three original champions gained on Karl on the Leader board, despite his blatant advantage because of his cheating. The final task was expected to be a spectacular event and all three schools cheered madly for their champions while they got ready to get into the maze that had been grown in the Quidditch Pitch. Little did they know what was coming. They certainly didn't expect to see Diggory and Potter get to the Cup at the same time after a full sprint and then, disappearing into thin air after they touched it. Harry remembered

well that afternoon. It was then, when he fully realised that there was a war going on and that he wouldn't last a second if he didn't learn how to defend himself.

## Flashback

Harry wasn't even in the crowd when his brother came back safely from Little Hangleton's graveyard. He was with Professor Snape, in another unfair detention, for having blown up a cauldron. It wasn't the worst detention that either of them had had to endure, as they both knew that Dumbledore had arranged that Karl would be the first to get to the Cup. Neither of them was in a hurry to see that Brat-Who-Lived win the TriWizard Tournament. While Snape marked essays ignoring him completely, Harry was cleaning some cauldrons the hard way, the muggle way, without magic.

The comfortable silence was disrupted when Professor Snape clutched his left arm and let out a scream all of a sudden. Despite not particularly liking the man, Harry ran to his side and kneeled beside him. He asked him in a desperate voice what was happening to him, but Snape seemed to be in such pain that it kept him from talking. He had his eyes strongly shut and all that came out of his mouth were painful screams. Harry panicked and didn't know what to do. All professors were at the Quidditch Pitch, where the Final Task was being held. Madam Pomfrey was bound to be there and Harry considered going down to fetch her, but he decided against it. It would take too much time, probably she wouldn't be allowed to leave her post and he didn't think it was a good idea to leave Snape here on his own. After a few seconds, Snape's screams ceased with the same suddenness with which they came. Snape lay there panting for some moments ignoring Harry, who was bombarding him with questions. He finally got up and ran out off the Potions classroom as if nothing had happened, all of his strength and energy back, only stopping at the door to address Harry.

"Detention's over Potter. Don't speak to anyone of what happened here and go to your common room until the rest of your house-mates join you there!"

Harry was couldn't even ask him why before the Potions Master left in a hurry. Resigned, Harry collected his things and strolled towards his common room. He arrived and found it empty so he went up to his dorm, dropped his bag beside on his trunk and lay back in his

bed pondering about what had happened with Snape. He had seen a small column of smoke rising from in between the Professor's fingers. What could possibly make someone scream as if you were under the Cruciatus Curse and supposedly burn your flesh? He would ask Neville, although he doubted he would know. Snape had told him, no, ordered him, not to tell anyone, but he would be damned if he didn't tell his best friend.

He wondered if the tournament was over yet. He couldn't see the Quidditch Pitch from their dorm so he took out his Marauder's Map, which he had recovered from the Weasley twins a couple of days ago, and scanned the parchment. The students were already starting to leave the Pitch and surprisingly, they walked in six big groups. Four of them were being led by the school's prefects back to the castle. Harry quickly noted that these were the four different Hogwarts Houses, while the other two groups were formed by Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students. Dumbledore, Barty Crouch, Ludo Bagman, Madam Maxime and others were walking around aimlessly and hurriedly. If anyone had asked Harry he would have described their movement as erratic. He saw his parents' footprints following Dumbledore's around. Snape was nowhere to be seen. Something was definitely going on. The champions from the foreign schools were standing together at the exit of the pitch. Oddly enough the real Hogwarts champion, Cedric Diggory, was right in the middle of the pitch but without a set of footprints beside him. It was then when Harry realised that Karl wasn't there, neither with his parents or the other champions. He looked around for him but without success. Where was he? He used the special feature which Sirius had implemented with which any person could be found only by speaking his, or her, name. He spoke his brother's name and the ink that was previously drawing a Quidditch pitch rearranged itself and showed two sets of footprints walking towards the DADA classroom. One set was his brother's, but the other set was from Barty Crouch Jr. It was then when Harry realised fully that something was really wrong. He remembered clearly the Prophet special edition that was printed when this man had died in Azkaban. The man was a Death Eater, and according to the Map, he was not dead. He hated very much his brother, but he supposedly was their saviour, although he personally doubted it. Saviour or not, it would be a major blow to the Light side if he died, and besides, there was a Death Eater loose in the school, and he was the only one who knew and that could do something about it.



He got up determinately, and walked through the door, down into the common room and into the school halls. Checking the map he saw that the students and Professors were still a few minutes away and that Barty Crouch Jr. and Karl were in Professor Moody's Office. 'What the hell are they doing there?' he thought. He ran all the way there and stopped outside the door to check the Map again. He activated it to make sure that only one Death Eater was behind that door. Only Crouch Jr. and his brother were in there. He took out his wand, his hands trembling wildly. He wondered what the hell he thought he was doing. He was nothing more than an average fourth year dueller. What could he do against a Death Eater? He made a mental note to ask the Sorting Hat, if he ever saw it again, if he shouldn't have been sorted into Gryffindor, because this is how he was behaving, like a foolish Gryffindor running blindly into a dangerous situation because it was the right thing to do.

He pressed his ear against the door while he tried to open it manually. It was locked, and silenced, it seemed. They had covered both incantations in Charms this year so he managed to counter them in a few minutes with great effort. Then he started to hear clearly what was going on inside. He took out an Extendable Ear the twins had given him and pushed it against the door while he peered through the keyhole. What he heard then made his insides freeze with fear.

"Voldemort's back, Karl?" he heard Moody's voice say. Moody's voice? Moody was not there, only Crouch Jr. and... His eyes widened when he put two and two together and realized that Moody had to be an impostor. It was Barty Crouch impersonating him!

"You're sure he's back? How did he do it?" Moody's voice continued.

"He took stuff from his father's grave, from me, and from a Death Eater, one who looked different than the others. His mask wasn't silver as in the rest of them." Suddenly Moody looked very interested in this piece of information.

"No? What color was it?" he asked.

"It was black. And shiny too." said Karl.

"The Hand of Death..." said Moody in nothing more than a whisper.

"Who?"

"He's rumored to be the Dark Lord's right hand. Nobody knows who he is or what his services to the Dark Lord entail, but he's been around since the First War. What happened then? What did the Dark Lord take from you?" he asked.

"Blood," said Karl's voice.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Karl. "Loads of them..."

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?"

"There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts!" Karl started saying in an urgent tone. "There's a Death Eater here - they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end -"

"I know who the Death Eater is." Moody cut in quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Karl wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord who wish to meet him... but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's gone? He ran away? But then - he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that."

This was it. Harry knew he had to act. He heard a couple of indiscernible yells inside the Office which he was sure were curses or hexes. He pushed the door open in a violent manner and found Karl sitting petrified in a chair and the Alastor Moody look-a-like pointing his wand towards him. He felt his instincts kick in and he dropped to the ground, somewhat clumsily, but managing to avoid by mere centimeters the greenish light that came his way. When he

landed on the floor he raised his wand and sent a weak stunner towards the Death Eater. Crouch judged the stunner by its pale color, thought it wouldn't be powerful enough to stun him, and chose to fire a dark curse at Harry instead of raising a shield to protect himself. It turned out to be the wrong choice, as Harry, despite not being able to cast stunners as powerful as he was capable of, his powerful magical core made his weakest stunners powerful enough to knock out a fully grown man. Harry's spell connected with fake Moody just before a grey light came out of the Death Eater's wand, hitting Harry on the chest. While Moody fell to the floor, knocked out, Harry screamed in agony as a series of two-inch deep cuts appeared all over his torso and chest, and started bleeding wildly.

When Crouch was knocked out, his influence over Karl disappeared and the Boy-Who-Lived found himself free of the full body binding curse he was under. He had just recovered his wand when the door flew open violently again and members of the Order, led by Dumbledore, barged in. Madam Pomfrey was immediately at Harry's side, while Lily and James, looked concerned about both their sons. But seeing the Hogwarts nurse tending to Harry, they ran to Karl who was looking extremely pale. By now Harry was slowly losing consciousness due to blood loss and didn't understand what the alarmed and raised voices were saying around him.

The last thing that Harry saw before losing consciousness was the fake Moody, who was transforming slowly into his real self. It was certainly not a pleasant view. Snape shoved some potion down the Death Eater's throat before Harry blacked out.

Harry woke up the next morning after a nasty nightmare involving pain, shape shifting Death Eaters, and curses. He yawned tiredly and outstretched his arm blindly towards his bedside table where he found his glasses. He rubbed off the sleep from his eyes before opening them. How strange, he wasn't in his dorm, but in the... Infirmary? He gasped when memories of the previous evening flooded into his mind. After sitting up on the bed he lifted his shirt and sighed when he found no traces of the multiple cuts he had gained yesterday.

"Good morning Mr. Potter. How are you feeling?" said the Hogwarts nurse while coming his way.

"I'm fine. How long have I been...?"

"Only a few hours. It was only yesterday when you were hit with that Dark Curse. I've spent all night removing the Dark magic so I could heal the wounds correctly." she explained while performing some diagnosis spells over his bare chest.

"Harry!" came Neville's excited voice from the Hospital Wing's doors. "How are you doing?"

"I'm all right. I just feel a little bit weak."

"That's quite understandable. You suffered massive blood loss and the curse blocked out the effects of a blood replenishing potion. I had to resort to muggle needles to get some blood into your veins." said the nurse.

"When can I leave?"

"After lunch, if your blood levels have gone back to normal. Here, you have to drink one of these every hour until I come and check up on you at lunchtime." she said, placing some small vials with a crimson potion inside. Then the nurse left and Harry turned to Neville.

"Is it true?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Is what true?" Neville replied frowning.

"Is Voldemort really back?" Neville's face lost all its previous color.

"What?" he said in a whisper. "Where did you get that from?"

"Dumbledore didn't tell you?"

"He hasn't told anything to anyone yet, although there are rumors that he'll be explaining during dinner tonight what happened. All we students know is that your brother and you were captured by a Death Eater that had infiltrated the school, and that supposedly," he emphasized that word; "Karl stunned him and saved you."

"WHAT!" exploded Harry.

"It's all over the Prophet mate. Your brother was interviewed and confirmed the story. He's getting another Order of Merlin for it."

"Well the Prophet got it wrong then!"

"Care to explain me what's going on? Why are you... saying He's back?"

"I wasn't captured by any Death Eater. I was with Snape doing detention. Then something weird happened to him and told me the detention was over. So I got to our dorm and in the Map I saw Karl being led away from the Quidditch Pitch by Barty Crouch Jr., a known convicted Death Eater."

"Harry, Barty Crouch Jr. died months ago."

"No, he did not. He has been impersonating Moody all year long!"

"What? The Prophet never said anything about that!"

"I suppose Dumbledore will want to keep it quiet that he hired a Death Eater."

"How come Dumbledore didn't realize?"

"Another failure of the 'Greatest' Wizard of our time." Harry said sarcastically. "What's more, he and Moody are close friends. How is it possible that he didn't suspect a thing?"

"A bit strange if you ask me. So what happened then? You went to what... save Karl?"

"As weird as that sounds yes. When I got outside the DADA office, I overheard their conversation. From what I heard Karl had just been recently kidnapped and used to resurrect Voldemort."

"Are you certain that's what you heard?" asked Neville, wishing all this was not true.

"Yes! Then Crouch explained how it had been him that he had put his name in the Goblet and Karl tried to duel him but got hit by a Petrificus Totalus. I barged in and we fired simultaneously a spell at each other. Mine stunned him while his produced all of those cuts

over my chest." he explained, shivering when he remembered the dark curse and the pain.

"When we were at the stands and your brother and Diggory got to the Cup, they both disappeared. Everyone thought it was part of the task but then the teachers got really worried and we knew something was wrong. After a few minutes the Prefects were instructed to lead the students back to their common rooms. It was then when Karl reappeared with Diggory's dead body."

"Wait! Diggory's dead?" he asked in barely a whisper.

"Yeah, I thought you knew."

"No I didn't. Dear Merlin! What happened after that?" Harry replied.

"I don't really know. All students were instructed to go back to the castle that very moment. When we arrived at the common room I supposed you would still be with Snape, but Professor Sprout came by and took me here to see you. They allowed me to stay a bit after curfew but insisted that I went to the Great Hall to get something to eat. By then many rumors were already spread. You know how it works."

"I see... My parents, did they come?" Neville looked unsure for a moment.

"They were here for a while, when Karl was also here. Your mother remained here for a few more minutes before leaving when Karl was discharged." Harry nodded sadly in understanding.

"Hey Nev. If Voldemort's really back, it means the war will start again, eventually. When I faced Crouch I was scared and didn't know what to do. I felt really helpless. Yesterday I survived because of luck, but I don't want to rely on that alone. I think we have, no, we must, learn how to defend ourselves."

"You mean like... undergo some type of training?"

"With what we're being taught in DADA perhaps we could fare well against isolated threats that could happen to anyone in their daily life. But that's not enough to survive in a war. I think that when next year

starts we should get some dueling books and learn new spells. Auror grade spells." he clarified.

"Those are damn difficult Harry. And-"

"Surviving in a battle against Death Eaters will be damn difficult if we don't do this Neville." Harry cut in.

Neville sighed, knowing that his friend was right. "And where will we get them? They're regulated by the Ministry."

"Sirius will be able to help us, I think."

"We could do some fitness training to. Truth is we're not exactly fit..." Neville commented.

"I agree." said Harry nodding. "If we can't overpower them, we'll outlast them. And you know what? I think it would be a good idea if we became Animagus. The wider our repertoire is, the better."

"Like your godfather Sirius, huh?" Neville said, a wicked smile forming in his face. "I love the idea."

End Flashback

Indeed Dumbledore explained what had happened after the last task of the Triwizard Tournament. Karl was once again hailed as the hero as he also took merit for apprehending Barty Crouch Junior. Minister Fudge was clearly not up to the task of stopping Voldemort and after trying to cover it all up, he was thrown out of Office. The Head of the Magical Law Enforcement, Rufus Scrimgeour was voted unanimously as the new Minister for Magic.

Karl Potter didn't even show up to thank his brother for saving his life. That morning, Harry and Neville decided to train themselves as hard as they could. Voldemort was back and although they had always suspected he would resurrect sooner or later, they had hoped it would be later when they were out of school and able to defend themselves. So they started a morning training regime since the first day of school in their fifth year and were determined to stick to it until they came of age, when they planned to leave England, the 'Boy-Who-Lived' crap, and the war behind. But that was thinking too much time ahead.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!



## Chapter 4: The Way My Life Is

Harry looked at his clock. It was already seven o'clock in the morning. Two hours until the classes started. He got up from his bed, trying to make as little noise as possible, and rummaged through his trunk. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his friend and dorm-mate Neville Longbottom mirroring his movements with as much quietness as he could manage. They pulled out their sportswear and when they were changed they left the Hufflepuff Basement and headed out into the grounds to carry out their morning exercise regime.

A chilly winter morning greeted them when they crossed the main doors of the castle and ventured into the school grounds, which were adorned by a thin layer of frost covering the grass, but that did not dampen their spirits. There were about two weeks left until the Christmas holidays started, and they had increased their workout a few days ago to make up for the amount of sweets and food they would be eating during that time. They exercised each morning for about an hour and then practised magic in a secluded spot they had come across while doing laps around the lake. Since they had started doing this every morning their grades had improved in all areas, although they didn't strictly study the Hogwarts syllabus. They only borrowed books from the library about useful hexes, curses, jinxes... That's what they learned, how to use them, and how to block them. They still had problems with some subjects though. Harry had trouble with Charms, probably because of their current teacher, his mother. He would do badly in Transfiguration too for the same obvious reason, but it seemed he had a knack for it and it came to him easily. Neville on his part still struggled in Potions. Snape had always intimidated him, even now with their new found confidence.

In the physical aspect, their strength, endurance and speed had increased immensely as well since September. Even some of the girls were starting to notice the once chubby boys who had changed drastically since the end of fourth year. Neville still had his crush on the Abbott girl. Harry made sure to tease him occasionally and he couldn't get back at him as his crush had left Hogwarts after the TriWizard Tournament dramatic ending. What Neville didn't know is that Harry had started to develop another crush in Wilkinson, the girl he had taken to the Yule Ball last year. Truth is that since then they hadn't talked much to each other than the occasional 'hello' or 'good

morning', but after seeing her at the start of their fifth year something changed and he couldn't stop thinking about her. Unfortunately, she started dating an older Ravenclaw during October, so all that Harry had done was sit back and hope it didn't work out, which had happened only two weeks ago.

They came to the shore of the lake and started doing their stretches. The lake was freezing cold at this time in the year. They hoped that perhaps, after the Easter holidays, the water would be warm enough for them to be able to swim in it again, instead of running around it.

"So the usual six laps?" asked Neville.

"Of course Nev. And we shall stop during the last one to practice our magic."

"Normal magic, or Animagus?"

"I'm in the need of practising a couple of new Charms I came across in a book, but Animagus is definitely more fun and much more interesting."

"Did yesterday's meditation work?"

Harry sighed. "No. It didn't work at all. I'm still seeing another blurry shape besides the peregrine falcon."

"Don't worry. You'll get to see it, eventually. Just don't give up, okay?"

"I hope so. What worries me is that I don't know of anyone that has had more than one form. In all the books we have consulted, they all talk about a form. What if I'm working for nothing?"

"And what if you're not? They don't mention the impossibility of having more than one. It took you five months to discover your first form, and it took me even longer. You've only been working in this second form for a couple of months only."

"I hope you're right."

"Do you still think you shouldn't talk to your... father?" Harry glared at him. "He's an Animagus after all." Neville defended.

"I'm not going to my father with this. Two forms? A dual Animagus? He'll think I'm inventing it. It's always like that. If anything out of the ordinary happens to Harry, it's an anomaly, it has happened by chance or is a lie. I'm not my brother, so asking him or my mother for help is useless."

"And what about your godfather? Wasn't he an Animagus too?"

Harry's face lit up at the mention of his godfather and then he mentally kicked himself. He had been keeping this a secret for him, hoping to impress him once he managed the transformation, but it had never crossed his mind the possibility to ask him for help until now.

"Of course! Neville, you're a genius. How can it possibly be that I didn't think about it earlier? When we get back to the castle I'll write to him. We have a Hogsmeade weekend in two days. I'll have him meet us there. If he's available, of course."

"Anyway, today we're starting human transfiguration with Potter. Luckily we'll find out without asking anything directly. If not, then I'm afraid you'll have to solve the problem by yourself mate. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, let's go." replied Harry taking off at a relaxed and steady pace following the trail that bordered the Black Lake.

.o0o.

Later on that day they entered Professor Potter's classroom, highly pleased with themselves, especially Neville who had managed a nearly total transformation. He had changed all of his body except his head into a wolf. It had been quite amusing to see a wolf running around with Neville's head. Harry, who had managed his transformation a week ago, had practiced changing into his falcon form again and again to gain speed and confidence. He was able to change into the falcon, and back again, in under five seconds. Then he had meditated for a few minutes before it was time to head back to the castle. He had managed to see the other figure a little bit clearer. He could guess its size, and that it was most likely a land animal, but nothing more. Neville was certain that he would discover it before the holidays started.

They sat in their normal seats at the end of the classroom and waited for the class to start, as they had arrived early, as always since the start of this year. Harry's father didn't even acknowledge his own son's presence when he came through the door, not a word, not a smile, not even a glance.

Unfortunately, Hufflepuff shared the class with the Gryffindors on Thursday's transfiguration period, so Harry and Neville had to endure Karl's presence and ignore his taunts when he arrived. He observed with a disgusted face how his father smiled warmly at Karl and his friends when they entered the classroom and took the places at the front of the classroom.

"Today we are starting the field of human transfiguration." announced James when the Golden Trio was seated. After all why wait for the other students to arrive? "Can anyone tell the difference between human-to-animal transfiguration and an Animagus transformation? Yes Ms. Granger?"

"The difference between human-to-animal transfiguration and the Animagus transformation ability is that an Animagus can change into an animal whenever they want, without a wand or an incantation. Being an Animagus is an ability, and Transfiguring requires a spell."

"Very good Ms. Granger, ten points to Gryffindor. Does anyone want to add something?" Harry put his hand in the air. He heard his brother's snicker when he did so.

"Animagus have the ability to communicate with other animals, unlike human-to-animal transfiguration, which can't. Another difference is that human-to-animal transfiguration can transform you into an animal of your choice. You'll only change back when the spell wears off or a person casts the counter spell. In the Animagus case, they can only change into a determinate form, or forms," he decided to add to see if it was possible, without openly asking. "which is said to normally match the person's personality."

"Good, Mr. Potter. However you have made a mistake. Would someone like to correct him?" Karl raised his hand. "Yes Mr. Potter?"

"An animagus only has one form. Not forms." he replied with a smug look. Ronald Weasley snickered and Hermione looked at him as if he had pronounced a blasphemy, but Harry kept his cool and waited to see if his father confirmed or not the impossibility of his situation.

"That's correct Mr. Potter." James said with a smile. "Ten more points for Gryffindor."

"Always favouring the Gryffs..." they heard someone say.

"What was that Mr. Macmillan?"

"Nothing, Sir."

"Good. Now open your books at page 317. Animagus transformations." They quickly tuned his lecture out, as they had read every book in Hogwarts about Animagi.

"Don't worry mate." Neville whispered to him reassuringly. "You have two forms. You have seen it in your meditation and I saw it in the countless methods we used to check it. There's no mistake in that."

"I know, thank you mate."

Harry knew more about the subject than his father, which happened to be the Professor, so he decided to make a better use of his time. He would meditate for a while and see if he got lucky. He checked that his father wasn't looking, and then he took out his wand and performed a charm in his eyelids so that when he shut his eyes, they would seem open to everyone else. Then, he assumed a position that would look as if he was taking notes. He cleared his mind, tuned out all sounds, and in a matter of seconds he was staring again at the blurry form that had been irritating him for the past few weeks. By the shape and size of the figure, he could guess that it might be a dog, or something similar, maybe bigger. He spent many minutes trying, but with no avail. But, at last, after many minutes of these futile efforts, the blurry form started to become clearer. The fog-like thing that was surrounding it seemed to be fading slowly. Very slowly. Near the end of the period, the once grey form, had acquired some colour. It was black, or otherwise a very dark shade of some other colour. It had a long tail and an athletic body. He was about to discover more when he received a nudge from Neville that

distracted and pulled him out of his trance. Blinking a few times, his eyes adjusting to the light he saw his father talking to him, but he wasn't able to discern it.

"Sorry Sir. Could you repeat the question?" he said.

"I asked you which are the most known ways to know if you have the ability to become an Animagus." his father repeated in an annoyed manner.

"The Animagus Revealing Potion, sir." he said curtly and confidently. He knew there were dozens of ways to do it. They had personally done most of them to check if Harry's three forms were an anomaly, but he didn't want to show his knowledge in the topic to his father. He and Neville were keeping their transformations secret after all. Furthermore he knew that whichever he said, James would always point out that he had forgotten the other methods. Then Karl would raise his hand and answer, correctly or not, but would get Gryffindor some points. And that was exactly what happened.

"Correct, although you have failed to mention that there are many others. Does anyone know some of them? Yes Mr. Potter?" he said looking at Karl.

"Meditation, the Power to become Potion, and the Ignelyus Charm, among many others."

"Very good, Mr. Potter. Take fifteen more points for Gryffindor. For next class I want each of you to choose five different forms of doing this, which have not been mentioned in this class, and explain them in detail. Mr. Potter, stay behind, I would like to have a word with you." he said looking towards Harry, who only sighed, annoyed, and nodded.

"I'll wait outside." Neville told him as he rose from his seat and prepared to leave.

Slowly, but steadily the class emptied, until Harry and his father were the only ones left. Harry picked his bag and approached the teacher's table with a rather bored and unenthusiastic expression showing in his face.

"What did you want to talk me about, Mr. Potter?" he said icily, but his father didn't seem to notice.

"You can call me Dad, Harry. No-one's around." James said with a little laugh. Harry stayed silent, expecting his father to continue. "Well I asked you here because I noticed you were distracted in today's class, as well as in the previous ones. May I see the notes you were taking?"

"No."

"Excuse me?" James said indignantly.

"I said you can't see them, as I didn't take any."

"Damnit Harry! Can't you follow your brother's example for once? He's in the top three students of your year," Harry snorted. "and meanwhile you fool around during my lectures and giving me mediocre answers to my questions. When will you grow up Harry? Don't you understand this is your own education in the line?"

"If you really cared enough about that to check my marks every once in a while, you would discover that I have the same marks as him, if not better. The difference is that I don't have Dumbledore tutoring me all year long. And if you really knew your stuff, you would realise that the answers I have given you are perfectly acceptable and correct."

He turned and left the Transfiguration class, ignoring his father's yelling. He found Neville waiting outside the door, as promised.

"Come on. We're already late for Charms." He said taking off at a fast pace.

"Eugh." Harry said discouraged. "This is the worst Thursday ever. First transfiguration with... him! And then, right after that, Charms with... her! Thank Merlin that both periods aren't with Gryffindorks."

Neville shook his head and laughed. "Harry, you've been saying that every single Thursday since we got our timetables at the start of term."

"I know." Harry replied still feeling a bit depressed. "But it's true. Every Thursday seems worse than the previous one. Especially when they are becoming more and more irritating."

"You had another row with him?" asked Neville when they already were halfway to Lily's classroom.

"Yeah, you didn't hear it? He started going on again about how I should learn about the git that I unfortunately call brother. I told him, in a polite way, to piss off."

"Good." grinned Neville. "So what about your meditation? How did it go? Very few times I have seen you so concentrated."

"I managed to see the form a little clearer, although it wasn't enough." Harry said excitedly. Then the excitement in his voice ceased as he continued. "If Potter hadn't bothered me I would probably have managed a lot more. But I have some ideas now that I have a clearer image."

"Tell me."

"Well, it had a long tail, and it looked like a big cat. A feline maybe. The only thing I know is that it's black, or some similar colour."

"Pity we don't have 'normal animal' books here at Hogwarts."

"Yes. There aren't many books about non-magical things in the library. I wonder how the people who take Muggle studies can do their assignments with only their notes to look at."

"They probably ask Muggleborns." Neville said with a shrug.

"I can only hope that the image becomes clear enough to distinguish it without having to refer to books. I'd be screwed then."

.oOo.

Satisfyingly, they were paired up with the Ravenclaws for Charms, which was good for two reasons. The obvious one was that Karl and his goons wouldn't be around and second and of most importance for Harry, he got a chance to observe dreamily the pretty Ravenclaw he was after. He was still figuring out how to approach her and was



planning to tell Neville about her soon so he could help him figure out a way. They arrived outside the classroom and stopped before the door. Harry glanced at Neville and nodded towards the doorknob.

"No way mate." said Neville with a smirk. "I'd rather let you face your mother's wrath, besides, it was you who forgot to ask your father for a note to explain why we're late."

Harry sighed and grabbed the doorknob. He knocked two times before pushing the door open and effectively drawing all the attention of the class, including the pair of grey eyes Harry adored. Attention. Unlike James and Karl, attention was one thing he thought he would never get used to. When they stepped in Lily turned from the blackboard to face them.

"Ten points from Hufflepuff for your lateness." she said sternly.

"Professor Potter asked me to remain behind Professor." Harry defended.

"I'm aware of that Mr. Potter. I'm also aware that he specifically asked you to remain behind, not Mr. Longbottom. Now sit down before I take more points from Hufflepuff."

Reluctantly they took the only empty seats that were left at the end of the class. Harry's mother started going on about the Shrinking and Enlarging Charms, which she had already started explaining before they arrived. Harry would have loved to continue with his meditation exercises, but these were supposed to be amongst the toughest Charms they would be learning this year, and besides, he'd rather not have his mother breathing down his neck for not paying attention. When she finally finished the lecture she took out a box filled with soup spoons and passed them out. They had to shrink their spoons until turning them into a teaspoon and then revert it back to its original size.

The hour progressed slowly. Harry tried again and again but he only managed to shrink his spoon partially. Neville wasn't doing much better so he didn't even bother asking him for help. In any other class, except Transfiguration and Potions, Harry would have asked the Professor for a few pointers if he found the spell difficult, but this was not going to happen as long as his mother remained the teacher. He couldn't help but glance at Riley, who was holding a

teaspoon in her hand and looking quite pleased with her work. Harry smiled but it instantly turned into a scowl when he saw Lily stopping by her desk and addressing her in a friendly manner.

He turned to his spoon again, and with the mixture of frustration and anger that Riley was friendly with his mother, fact which could only complicate matters for him if he ever approached her, he tried the charm again. He put a bit too much energy and the spoon shrank, a lot. So much that Harry wondered if he had come up with a new type of Banishing Charm, making objects smaller and smaller until they disappeared from sight.

"What the hell..." Harry cursed quietly. Neville looked up at Harry and then at the spot of his table at which he was staring at.

"What happened to your spoon?" he asked him. Harry turned to him looking a bit confused.

"I'm... not entirely sure." he said looking back and forth between Neville and his table, where the spoon supposedly was, albeit in a smaller size. "It started shrinking and it didn't stop." Neville chuckled good-naturedly.

"You'd better go and get another one from the box then."

Harry cursed again as he noticed that his mother and Riley were still talking at her table, which happened to be right beside Lily's, where the spare spoons were. He made his way to the front desk, hoping his mother wouldn't pay attention to him and didn't take more points from Hufflepuff for whatever reason she came up with. That was far too much to hope for, as he was going to discover soon enough.

"Mr. Potter, what are you doing in my desk?" she asked with a slight accusing tone. He turned immediately to her, spoon in hand.

"Getting another spoon." he explained waving the spoon for her to see.

"Professor." his mother reminded annoyed.

"Getting another spoon, Professor." he said glaring at her.

"Whatever happened to your other spoon that you have the need to replace it?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. Harry couldn't help it but his eyes were drawn to the beautiful blonde sitting beside his mother. She looked quite amused and was looking at Harry expectantly, wanting to know the answer.

"It accidentally shrank a bit too much, Professor." he explained turning to look again at his mother, and sensing a blush forming in his face as he knew that Riley was watching him closely.

"What do you mean by 'a bit too much'?" she continued with her questioning. At this point the class was silent and all students had abandoned their spoons momentarily to enjoy the show, which only helped Harry to become more nervous. Again, he couldn't help but look at Riley briefly. She was now smiling, and as before, waiting for his answer.

"Enough for it to disappear from view?" Harry replied turning to look again at his mother. There were several chuckles around the class but Harry only seemed to hear one, and he instantly loved it. Much to his dismay and utter disappointment it was cut short along with all other chuckles when Lily spoke again. It looked as if she didn't believe him and thought he had lost it, or robbed it, or something.

"Five points from Hufflepuff for wasting school material, Mr. Potter." she said. "Go back to your seat."

As many protests were heard Harry scowled and went to his seat again, not even bothering to protest. Now he was really pissed at her mother. He wondered why he thought of her as 'mother' when he clearly was neglecting her duties as such. Anyway, she had ruined a perfectly good moment just to take off points unfairly. Ever since Snape had become the Potions Professor, the House points system had lost all of its credibility. Snape abused the system from day one to ensure that Slytherin won the House Cup. The situation only worsened when both Potters became Professors and started doing the same. Only the Hufflepuff Head of House was fair. Harry would like to say that Hufflepuff was last in the standings because of that, but it would be lying.

Harry could not concentrate for the rest of the class and he just divided his time between watching his friend attempt the spell, and watching Riley trying the spell with more complex objects under his

mother's watchful eyes. A few minutes before the class ended he started to pack his things so he could leave before her mother had any chance of asking him to stay behind.

It seemed he had run out of luck today. When the bell rang he stood up from his seat and found his mother standing in front of him.

"I really need to get to the next class." Harry told her in an impertinent tone.

"I'd like you to stay behind. I don't think that Professor Binns will miss you much." she said and then walked away. Harry plopped down in his chair again and looked to Neville apologetically. Neville just pat him on the back as he left. Harry knew he would be outside waiting for him.

Slowly the students packed up their stuff and left for the next class. All students except two. Riley Wilkinson had remained behind to ask Professor Evans something about the lesson. They were talking animatedly so Harry approached them, hoping to leave as early as possible, and hoping that the Ravenclaw would become a bit more interested in him. He dropped his schoolbag in a nearby table, a bit noisily. They both turned to look at him, Lily with a reproachful look and Riley, with a small smile. Merlin, Harry liked that smile. They resumed their conversation but Harry could tell that it was ending. Soon a grateful Riley walked out of the classroom leaving Harry glaring at his mother and Lily packing up her own things.

"If you want to tell me something, do it now. Unlike you, I have classes to get to." he said icily. Lily looked up from her books and closed them with a noticeable thud.

"I spoke with your father before the class started."

"Yeah, so?" he replied quickly.

"Harry, it is rude to interrupt."

"Oh, will you take some more points then?"

"Probably, if you don't shut up!" she said. Harry glared at her. "He worries about you."

"And you don't? Wait, why am I even asking this if I already know the answer?" Harry said sarcastically.

"I'm worried too!" she told him exasperatedly. "You haven't done anything but stare at your spoon after you lost the first one."

"I didn't lose it. It just disappeared."

"Yeah, right."

"Are you joking? How could I possibly lose a spoon in a class? That's impossible unless someone decided to throw it through the window." Harry yelled, losing his patience.

"Anyway, after that you just sat in your chair sulking. And from what your father tells me, you did the same during all of his class."

"Well, his lectures are kind of dull."

"Can you stop being this difficult?" she yelled. Harry just remained silent glaring at her. "If you fail your Charms and Transfiguration OWLs, you'll be studying with private tutors during all summer to retake them just before school starts again." Harry couldn't help but to laugh disbelievingly. "What's so funny about that?" she asked. Harry's face adopted a murderous glare.

"All those years Karl and I spent in the Muggle School, I begged, year after year to be taught how to use magic during the summer holidays, just like Karl was. You never agreed to do it, I still don't understand why. And now, you're threatening to use that as a punishment? Is this some kind of a sick joke?"

"No it isn't. This is your future we're talking about."

"Since when have you cared about my future?" Lily decided to change topic before the situation got out of hand.

"We're going to spend here the Christmas Holidays. Dumbledore's says it isn't safe for your brother to go back to Potter Manor with Voldemort at large. The wards here at the castle are the strongest in the world."

"Fine. I'll spend my Christmas at Neville's." Harry said shrugging.

"No you won't. We want you to stick with your family." Lily said impatiently.

"Yeah, whatever." he said while turning around to leave.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!

## Chapter 5: Tryouts

The next Saturday when Harry and Neville returned from their morning workout they found many students crowding around the notice board. Harry didn't spare a second glance at it, thinking that he would have a look at it later, when there wasn't too many people around it. Neville couldn't help but wonder what had been posted that was causing such a stir. While Harry went straight to the dormitory to have a much needed shower, Neville joined the crowd. Thanks to his sweaty smell after the workout, he was able to walk straight to the notice board, the rest of the students keeping their distance and opening a path because of the smell. After he had read it, he took off quickly to their dorm-room.

"Harry!" he cried while he opened the door. "Harry!"

"What?" Harry asked as he prepared the school uniform.

"The Seeker position is free!"

Harry looked up instantly. "No way!" he said with a disbelieving face. "What happened?"

"Summerby has been suspended until next year for a fight he got into with your brother."

"And my brother?"

"He got off without a single detention. I'll bet that he's present at the tryouts later." Neville said disgustedly. Harry looked troubled by his brother's presence during his tryouts. "Don't worry, I'll be there to ensure he doesn't jinx your broom again."

"Thanks Nev... So when are the Tryouts?"

"In twenty minutes."

"Damn! So early? Then there's no time for a shower if I want to get a good broom from the school."

"Yeah, just Scourgify yourself, or something. You can have a shower after you have secured your spot in the team." he said with a reassuring smile.

Harry took off to the Quidditch pitch as fast as he could and arrived ten minutes early. He walked into the shed where school brooms were stored and inspected them all. Finally he decided for an old Cleansweep that was in better shape than all the others. It was a fast broom, and at least it would be reliable. He walked out of the shed and had the misfortune of running into his brother, Granger and Weasley. It wasn't a coincidence that they were all here, albeit being here seemed to bother a little bit the Gryffindor bookworm.

"What are you doing here brother?" Karl sneered, leaning casually into one of the stands pillars. "Going to make a fool of yourself, again?"

Harry stayed silent and ignored him while he continued walking towards the Pitch. Soon he was stopped by Weasley, who stepped into his path, with Karl beside him. Harry sighed and hoped they would go away if he continued to ignore them.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Weasley.

"Going to do what you'll never be capable of, Weasley." he replied coolly, losing a bit of his temper. When Ron was still processing what Harry was implying Harry finished his statement. "Getting into a Quidditch team."

"You're hopeless in a broom." Ron sneered. "You'll never make it. And as for me I'll get in real soon. Sooner than you think."

"Oh, really? How are you gonna do that? Will you ask Karl and my father to stage another fake duel to suspend your current Seeker, like you did with Summerby, or will you just beg for it?" Harry asked cruelly. He was fed up with the boy's unfounded arrogance.

"Harry," said Karl, keeping his fuming crony back. "Don't you remember what happened the two last times you got on a broom? You crashed both times, unable to keep your broom under control. Why don't you step down and avoid being hurt again?" he said.

"Is that a threat?" Harry replied coldly.

"Take it as a piece of advice. One you should definitely listen to."



"Are you sure you aren't telling me this because of another reason, other than my own safety, for which you've never cared before, brother?"

"And what would that be?"

"Judging by your continuous sabotage when I'm on a broom, I'd say you're afraid I get into the team and demonstrate I'm way better than you."

"Do you really think I'm afraid of being bested by you?" Karl asked incredulously.

Harry took a step towards Karl. In a cool tone he said: "I think you have been afraid all your life." Karl's face went red and Weasley spoke up.

"Karl's the best Chaser there is. Youngest one to get in a Quidditch team in over two centuries! How could he be bested by someone like you? A Hufflepuff!" the Gryffindor cut in arrogantly. Harry took a glance at him. Then he looked back at his brother.

"You mean he was the only first year to be allowed to try out for a team in over two centuries. Isn't that impressive when you look at it from another angle, huh?"

"Be that as it may, I'm the best Chaser around, and you aren't even in a team, and you'll never be."

"Well, we'll see. Now if you could move out of my way or else..." He feigned he was going for his wand.

"Or else what?" Karl said drawing his own wand and taking a step closer. Harry could only smirk. An authoritative voice boomed behind Karl and Ron.

"Or else you'll step down the next match, Mr. Potter." They turned and saw Madam Hooch. The middle aged woman was in love with Quidditch, and always enjoyed a good game no matter which team was playing. Ever since Karl Potter had broken the Gryffindor team five years ago, a team that was destined to win the House Cup the next few years, she had disliked the arrogant and upity boy. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Ms. Granger, I believe that none of you are

Hufflepuffs, so you have no business here, unless you want to presence the tryouts in which case you'll head to the stands. Am I making myself clear?"

The Gryffindors nodded and soon disappeared from sight. The flying instructor indicated Harry where the Quidditch Captain was waiting for the new applicants.

.oOo.

When the tryouts finally started, Hermione had went back to the castle while Karl and Weasley had taken a place in the stands, ready to mess up with Harry's broom at the earliest convenience. They were angry and annoyed that their taunts didn't have any effect and that Harry was going in fact going to try out despite their threats.

Harry found the whole Quidditch team gathered beneath the northern set of hoops of the pitch. Beside them a small group of contestants were waiting anxiously. A seventh year, two sixth years, Justin, from his own year, and a third year. They all had good brooms, but that wouldn't be a problem. He was the most skilled flier in Hufflepuff, he knew that for certain. Harry had gone flying hundreds of times at night with school brooms, and now thanks to his animagus form, knew how it felt to fly without a broom.

"Ok, listen up!" the Quidditch Captain said in a loud and clear voice. "We're gonna do the following. There are six of you for two spots only, Seeker and reserve Seeker. We'll release four snitches. The fliers that do not catch one are out. Next round we'll release three. The three who catch them will pass to the final round, were only one Snitch will be released. Winner gets the position. Second in row gets the reserve position, got it?"

There were some nods of agreement. Harry looked to the stands and saw his brother. Thankfully Neville was near them and would be ready to step in if they tried anything. They started by flying some laps around the pitch, and after a few minutes, the Snitches were released. Harry was able to follow one from the distance, never leaving his sight. None of the other fliers had seen one yet. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Then he felt a sudden lurch on his broomstick, similar to the ones he received when Karl jinxed his broom, but it disappeared as fast as it

had come. He took a quick glance towards the stands. He saw Neville behind his brother and Weasley. He had his wand out. He made a mental note to thank him once the tryout was over. Several seconds after that incident he caught the Snitch and landed to wait for the others to finish.

.o0o.

Half an hour later, Harry and Neville were leaving the Quidditch Pitch and walking happily towards the school. Harry had caught the last Snitch and had rightfully entered the team.

"Hey Neville? I saw what you did before in the stands. I wanted to say thank you." said Harry sincerely.

"It was nothing mate." Neville said shrugging it off.

"Of course it was! That git could have killed me! You saved my life Neville, and I thank you for that."

"It was nothing. I'm just happy to teach those retards a lesson. Besides, what did he think he was doing?" Neville exploded. "You were diving downwards at what, sixty miles an hour?"

"Maybe more."

"And the git decides to play like that with your life..."

"That's the way he treats people. He plays with their lives, manipulates them."

"He's Dumbledore's protégé after all. What did you expect?"

"Yeah, you're right. But he should know better. So what did you hit them with?" asked Harry. Neville's face lit up with amusement.

"A couple of Petrificus Totalus. First I hit your brother, who was the one doing the jinxing and had his wand out. He was the most likely to counterattack if I failed. It was an easy shot. Weasley was eating and looking at you, expecting you to fall I think, so he didn't notice Karl at first, but when he did," Neville was now laughing. "the look on his face was priceless. He didn't have a clue about what was going on around him."

"That guy... I really don't know what makes him so dumb, but it really works."

"The best thing of all? They didn't see who cursed them, but they had first line seats to see how you became Seeker. I bet they were really pissed when you grabbed the second Snitch in front of them..."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, they sure were."

"It will take a while for the spell to wear off, so I bet we're gonna have a quiet Hogsmeade day."

"You mean you left them there?" Harry asked, his eyes wide. "That's brilliant." He said making them laugh.

They continued to their Common Room between laughs and nasty comments towards Karl. After a quick shower they went down for a late breakfast before heading down to Hogsmeade. Harry took the chance to take off the Quidditch Tryouts notice from the board, and he had to admit it felt good. When they arrived at the Great Hall they sat at their usual places, at the end of the table, where no one would bother them. Harry saw with great amusement as his parents, and Dumbledore, scanned the Great Hall, and the Gryffindor Table especially, obviously looking for Karl. He noted how worried they looked. A few minutes later, when they were in the last stages of their breakfast, the rustling of feathers was heard as owls streamed into the room with newspapers and mail in tow. Two owls landed in front of them. One was snowy white and the other one brown. They both had letter attached to their talons, and the brown one, which was Neville's had a second package attached.

"What do you have for me girl?" Harry asked his owl affectionately as he untied the letter from her talon. "Hey Nev, it's from Sirius." he said when he opened it.

"What does it say? Is he meeting us today?" Neville inquired while looking at the package he had received from his grandmother.

"Yes. Outside the Three Broomsticks, at noon." he replied after reading the first few lines.

"Cool. Take a look at this mate." he said while handing Harry a green book that had arrived along with his mail. "Grandma sent it to me, after I assured her I was trying to get to know Karl Potter."

"She's still pestering you with that?"

"Yeah, she says it's important to show publicly my loyalties to the so-called Light Side. I swear that sometimes she seems to be in love with Dumbledore and your brother." he said in a dull tone which made Harry snigger. Neville tapped with his finger the book in Harry's hands. "The book's about the different types of non-magical felines that exist. It may help you with your form."

"Wow, thanks Nev. I really appreciate it."

"She charmed it so only both of us, and Karl," he added with a groan "can look at it and see what it's really about."

"I'll be sure to write her a letter to express my gratitude."

"Write to whom?" asked a female voice behind them; a voice Harry knew too well, a voice he didn't quite like. He turned and saw his parents and Dumbledore looking at him expectantly.

"That's none of your business." he said dryly. Then he turned around again and continued eating in silence.

"Harry, don't you dare talk to your mother like that!" James berated him. "What's this?" said James angrily and grabbed Sirius' letter having recognized the handwriting. Harry sprung instantly to his feet and attempted to grab the letter out of his father's hand. James spread his arms, leaving Harry at the end of one of them, while reading the letter that was placed in the opposite hand.

"That's not for you to read!" Harry yelled, not caring about the fact that the entire Hall turned to look in their direction. James averted his gaze from the letter and looked at his son.

"Didn't I forbid you to write to him? Or see him?"

"You can't forbid me from seeing anybody!" he declared firmly.

"Yes I can. I'm your father. And I forbid you to see him ever again." Harry didn't respond and just glared at his 'father'.

"You're no father of mine!" Harry hissed dangerously.

"Albus, Harry hasn't parental permission to go to Hogsmeade anymore." James said with his eyes fixed on Harry's.

"Very well, I'll have Mr. Filch informed as soon as possible." the Headmaster said while Harry was complaining.

"Wha? You can't do that!"

"Yes I can. I told you to stay away from him and you chose to defy my judgment. Now you must deal with the consequences of your immature acts."

Harry groaned and many swear words later he sat on his table to finish his breakfast. He was going to Hogsmeade no matter what, with or without permission. He looked over his shoulder and groaned, again, when he saw that Dumbledore and his puppies, which he had the misfortune to call parents, weren't leaving just yet.

"Well now that you have finished with your censorship I'd like to finish my breakfast quietly. So get the hell out of here!" he hissed at them.

"We want to know where your brother is." his mother explained biting her lip at Harry's foul language.

"And I want you to get me a Firebolt just like the one Karl has. But some things aren't supposed to happen. Not now, not ever."

"Harry, stop being childish. Do you know where he is or not?" Lily reprimanded.

"No. But I saw him heading early to Hogsmeade." he lied in an annoyed manner. They looked at him suspiciously but said nothing. When they were leaving the Great Hall, in search for their spoiled son, James turned and talked to Harry one last time.

"And Harry, don't even try to leave the castle. If you do, I'll know." he said while tapping a blank piece of parchment. Harry glared at his

father's retreating back. Before he could turn back to his breakfast two figures sat at his side, the Weasley twins. They always managed to cheer him up no matter what.

"All right Harry? What-"

"was that all about?" they asked finishing each other sentence.

"My git of a father banned me from going to Hogsmeade." Harry said in a sullen tone.

"No way!" Fred said.

"That is evil!" George proclaimed.

"Evil indeed dear brother."

"He shall be severely pranked-"

"for this outrageous offence!" they said in a mock formal tone.

"Well, it's not like he'll stop me from going..." he said taking his own modified version of the Marauder's Map making them smirk.

"Anyway, we came to congratulate you in making the Quidditch team." one of the twins said.

"Don't be too hard on us. Our team is nothing short of a joke since the git joined." the other one added.

"Oh, I'll do what I must guys." Harry said looking apologetically but with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Well, as long as you knock the git out of his broom you shall escape our wrath." replied Fred.

"You can count on it." Harry said while laughing.

.oOo.

By the time that all students had already left, James was looking around frantically for his son. He had not believed Harry when he had told them he had left the castle. His son didn't appear in the

Marauder's Map so he had checked all the areas within the castle grounds that did not appear in the map, except for the Quidditch Pitch. He was on his way down there when Lily came running towards him with the Map in her hands. She had been looking again at the Map in case Karl reappeared.

"Did you find him?" James asked.

"No. But I saw Harry leaving the castle. He'll already be in Hogsmeade by now."

"Damn it. Why is he so bloody difficult, always defying us like this. He's gonna be grounded when I get him. He's going to be very grounded. And don't let me get started on Black..."

Lily sighed. "Why don't we head for the village already? Karl must be there anyway."

James looked at the Quidditch Pitch. Then he sighed and started walking towards his wife. "Ok. Let's go."

"How the hell did he even leave?" asked James a few minutes before they arrived in Hogsmeade.

"I think he used a broomstick. He didn't use any passageway out of the school, I'm not even sure he knows about those. He didn't even use the normal pathway that the other students use either. I saw him in the Astronomy Tower. Then he just moved towards Hogsmeade in a straight line."

"In a straight line you say? He must be flying."

"I'm not sure about that. He doesn't even have a broom."

"Then it must be a school broom, Lils. When I get my hands on him... I'm going to put him in detention for the rest of the year!"

They left without taking even a second glance to the Quidditch Pitch. Had they come any closer, they would have seen two people sitting in the stands, not moving, but watching them desperately as they left. They wished they could scream so they could be 'rescued' but Neville's well placed Petrificus were still working.



.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!

## Chapter 6: Hogsmeade

Sirius Black arrived at Hogsmeade five minutes before noon. He appeared with a soft pop a few feet away from the front door of the Three Broomsticks. He didn't go in because he had told Harry to meet him at the door, and apart from that, he didn't want to risk running into someone else of the Potter family. At five past noon he started to look around anxiously. He didn't see Harry anywhere, but he saw a tall teenager wearing muggle clothing walking towards him. At first he didn't recognize him, but after taking a closer look he realized it was the Longbottom's son. He had met him a couple of years ago when Harry had gone over to Neville's house and they had all gone to Muggle London together.

"Neville? Neville Longbottom?" he said looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"The one and only." he answered with a grin.

"Merlin, you've grown a lot these past years."

"Yeah, we haven't seen each other for what, two, three years?"

"More or less, yes, when I took Harry and you to London, remember? Speaking about him, where is he?" said Sirius looking around, searching for his face among the crowds.

"He's isn't coming just yet. He had to come to the village by other means."

"Other means? I'm afraid I don't follow." he said looking confused.

"Just follow me. Harry told me to meet him at a specific place. I'll explain while we walk. Come on, it's only a couple of minutes away."

"So why couldn't he come down to the village with you?" Sirius asked after they had covered a few yards.

"Professor Potter saw your letter this morning. He was really pissed and banned Harry from coming to Hogsmeade." Neville started explaining. Sirius just started to turn red of anger. "The Potters have the original Marauder's Map so they'd know if Harry used any secret passages, and Filch was forewarned not to let Harry out of the

school, so Harry had to improvise and think of a different way down here."

"Where are we meeting him?"

"Right here." came a voice from in between the trees to his right.

"Harry!"

"Hey Sirius!" he replied embracing him.

"How are you doing pup?"

"I'm fine. I trust that Neville has already told you about what happened with my father."

"Yeah, useless git." Sirius declared, extremely annoyed. "So you care for a drink while we discuss... whatever you wanted to discuss with me?"

"Sure, but not at the Three Broomsticks, or anywhere too public. Probably they have already noticed I'm not at school, so let's make things difficult for them if they try to come after me."

"How about we grab some Butterbeers and head into the woods. Nobody will overhear us there." proposed Neville.

"I know the perfect spot." Sirius said. "Wait for me in the tree line at the southern end of the village. I'll go and buy the drinks and meet you there in some minutes."

"Ok. See you in a bit Padfoot." Harry said patting him in the back.

Sirius walked back to the Three Broomsticks and stopped behind the queue that was formed at the bar. He had the fortune, or misfortune, of being directly behind of a James Potter and his son, who had just entered the bar with Weasley in tow.

"Hey dad. I've been looking for you all over the school." he heard the Boy-Who-Lived say.

"Karl!" James cried taking him into a brief embrace. "Are you okay? We've been looking for you too! You were supposed to meet Dumbledore at nine for your private lessons!" he berated his son.

"I know! We went to see the Hufflepuff tryouts for Seeker before that. Harry managed to get the position somehow." Sirius eyes lightened on hearing that statement.

"Really?" James asked as if it was a joke. "But Harry's rubbish in a broom. He's proved that countless times."

"He must have cheated or something." Sirius growled inaudibly at hearing that. "Anyway, halfway through the session Longbottom cursed us. He shot us Petrificus Totalus from behind with no reason at all. From behind Dad! Can you believe how much of a coward he is. I would have kicked his ass if he dared to curse me face to face."

"A Petrificus Totalus is not a curse, Karl. It's a spell." said Sirius, unable to hold a snigger. "And how do you know it was Longbottom? Don't you lose the ability to turn around and face your attacker when you're under that spell? And are you certain you didn't do anything to warrant the attack. Like say, jinxing someone's broom?"

"Shut up!" cried James grabbing Sirius by his shirt. "Weren't you listening when I told you to stay away from my family."

"I was. I swear." said Sirius in a mock voice. "But even that pathetic attempt of authority doesn't keep me away from a fine pub."

"We both know you aren't here for the pub, you're here to see Harry."

"Well, I don't see him." said Sirius while looking around with a smile, which contributed to rise James anger and impatience. "In fact I don't know where he is. Haven't talked with him for months."

"And this morning's letter?" James hissed.

"I'm afraid I don't know that you're talking about." Sirius denied it in a casual way.

"You damn well do. I saw the letter. So tell me, where is he? I know he left the castle after I forbid him to do so."

"Oh, he's so much like me. Sneaking into Hogsmeade without permission." replied Sirius with a grin. "He makes me so proud."

"Listen to me you idiot. You tell me where he is or I'll file charges against you for harassing my son!" James was now face to face with Sirius.

"I would hardly call that harassing, Potter. Now let go of me before I faint because of your stinking breath." James did not move and stared even more angrily at him. "I wonder what she saw in you, I was always the better man." Sirius said, talking about Lily, knowing it was the only way to get to him.

To that commentary, James did react. He distanced himself from Sirius a little bit, still grabbing him with one hand, and with the other one he threw a punch at him. Sirius caught it with his jaw, and then and he punched his former friend's gut in return. He healed his jaw with a simple charm and decided to head to the Hog's Head. It was much farther from the woods than the Three Broomsticks but it would have fewer customers, and fewer gits.

"You're not getting away with this, Black! You assaulted me. I have witnesses." cried James, still bending and clutching his torso in pain. Sirius stopped at the door and turned to face his 'ex-friend'. The whole pub was awaiting eagerly Sirius' comeback.

"And I have my own memory as witness." he replied tapping his forehead.

Then he left.

.oOo.

Neville and Harry saw Sirius coming their way nearly half an hour later. He was carrying two large bottles of Firewhiskey, and a bag of snacks. He wore a huge grin over his face.

"He seems happy." observed Neville amusedly.

"I wonder if it has anything to do with the bottles he's carrying." said Harry making them laugh.

"So what took you so long?" he asked when Sirius was within hearing distance.

"I ran into a certain someone at the Three Broomsticks and decided I didn't want around him anymore. So I left and headed towards the Hog's Head, at the north end of the village."

"You certainly did a considerable amount of walking then." Neville observed.

"This way. I know a quiet and isolated clearing in the forest just five minutes from here. The Marauders discovered it during their full moon excursions." Sirius explained, his look growing sad with every word. Ever since he had stopped seeing James and Peter he talked about their group in past tense, and talked about James, Remus and Peter as Prongs, Moony and Wormtail, as if they were completely different people from the actual ones.

"Padfoot, didn't we agree to get some Butterbeer, not Firewhiskey." said Harry while grabbing one of the bottles and inspecting it.

"Come on, that's for firsties only." Harry looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Okay, maybe for second years too." Sirius admitted.

"It's only half past noon. It's too early to be drinking." Harry observed.

"Oh, yes. But we can't possibly have a toast with Butterbeer, can we."

"A toast to what?" asked Neville.

"To Harry being Seeker." said Sirius with a proud smile. "Congratulations pup!"

"Thanks." he said returning the embrace. "How did you know about it?"

"Wanna take three guesses of whom I ran into at the Three Broomsticks?"

"My father. Or my Mother. Or my brother."

"James and Karl. He's blaming you for those Petrificus by the way." he told Neville with another proud smile.

"Too bad they can't prove anything. They didn't see me throw any spells."

"Karl was outraged you attacked them from behind." Sirius replied in mock disappointment.

"It was that or let him continue to jinx my broom." Harry explained.

"Yeah, I deduced they were doing just that." Sirius said with a sad voice. He had been so happy when James and Lily had had twins... It was really sad that Karl had ended being up even more arrogant and selfish than James was in their years at Hogwarts.

"Can you believe he did it when he was diving vertically at great speed?" said an outraged Neville. "He could have been killed."

"Sadly I can. Karl has grown as arrogant and greedy as his father once was, and in fact is again now, and he will do anything to take all the fame. I would be on your guard Harry. Undoubtedly he'll try something to stop you from playing. He is jealous of you. He knows you're much better in every aspect. He fears that you'll take his spotlight. It could be something that hurts you physically so you can't fly, or he'll go to your parents or Dumbledore with some excuse and they'll stop you from playing."

"Don't worry. Sprout showed up halfway through the tryouts. She saw how good you are. She won't let anything keep you from playing. Apart from Diggory we haven't had a decent flier for years. She knows that with you we have a chance at the Cup, if not this year, the next." Neville told them.

"I'm sure she was impressed." said Sirius.

"Of course she was. He's a great flier when he doesn't have someone jinxing his broom." said Neville reassuringly.

"Yes, I agree. Oh, here it is!" he said when they entered a small and circular shaped clearing. It was about four yards wide and had a few rocks that served as natural seats.

"Nice." said Neville.

"Yeah, that's what a dozen chicks said when I brought them here during Hogsmeade weekends." Sirius said sheepishly.

"Oh please Sirius, tell me this isn't where..." Harry said with a disgusted face.

"Where what?" he asked cheekily. "Ok, it is. But that was twenty years ago. Anything that was spilled here is now a few yards underneath us." Neville joined Harry in the disgusted faces club. They all placed a cushioning charm in one rock each to seat more comfortably. Harry and Neville added a Scourgify just in case.

"So first things first." said Sirius conjuring three glasses and filling them with the liquor. "To Harry, for becoming Seeker. May he kick his brother's ass in the next Quidditch match."

"To Harry!" exclaimed Sirius and Neville, and they all took a sip, although Sirius' was considerably longer. In fact, it was long enough to empty his glass. Harry and Neville coughed slightly.

"This is the first time you have Firewhiskey?" asked Sirius with an amused and knowing smile.

"No. But I think I still need a few more shots to become familiar with its taste." Harry said.

"Yeah. It takes a bit more than two glasses to get used to it. So what was so important that you wanted to talk about?"

"Oh, well, we are becoming Animagus." Harry disclosed. Sirius just sat there for a moment and then smiled widely and started bombarding them with questions and compliments.

"Really? How much have you managed? When did you decide to do it? I'm so proud. It took the Marauders three years. What are your forms? Are you doing it in secret? You're not registering are you? We have to get you some nicknames." Harry and Neville were openly laughing at this point.

"Calm down Sirius."



"Ok." he said taking a deep breath. "Ok. I'm calm now. So what are your forms?"

"Neville's a wolf." Harry explained.

"A canine animal, cool. You'll love it when you can smell things which are far away. Your night vision improves when you're transformed."

"Yeah. I know, I can't wait."

"How much progress have you made?"

"Pretty much." he said, changing slowly into the wolf, with the exception of his head. Sirius started laughing at the wolf with Neville's head.

"You remind me of Wormtail. He had the same problem, although it was far more amusing in his case. His form is a rat, you see, so the rat's body didn't have the strength to carry Wormtail's head around so he kept rolling all over his head around the room." he explained laughing. Then he became silent for a few seconds and continued in a sad voice. "I miss him sometimes, as I miss Moony, and Prongs, well before he became a jerk. That was amazing Neville, how long have you been doing it?"

"Since this summer."

"Wow. You did it faster than we did. What about you Harry? What is your form? Can you already transform completely?" Harry just transformed into the falcon. Sirius was now gaping at him.

"I bet it's amazing to fly freely. No broom, no charms, only your wings."

"You bet." replied Harry after changing back. "That's the way I came down here. I climbed into the Astronomy Tower. After an amazing dive I came here directly."

"What breed of falcon are you?"

"Peregrine Falcon. In a stoop I can reach speeds over 200mph."

"Wow. That's nearly twice more than you can achieve in a Firebolt."

"That's right."

"I think this qualifies for another toast." Sirius said grinning after staring at them proudly. He filled his empty glass, and Harry and Neville's half-empty ones.

"For your transformations. May we find you proper nicknames." Again he swallowed all the glass at once.

"So are you doing this secretly, as the Marauders did it?"

"Yeah. We don't want Karl, or my parents, or Dumbledore, or the Order to find out."

"You're not registering, are you?" Sirius said looking worried at their possible answer.

"No!" they both said.

"Perfect!" he said grinning.

"Sirius, there's something else we wanted to ask you. It's the main reason we asked you to come."

"Well?"

"What method did you use to discover your form?"

"We brewed the Animagus Revealing Potion, then I continued through meditation. But there are many other methods. Why? Which one did you use?"

"We used that potion at first. Then we used all the remaining methods."

"Why would you do that?"

"When I took my potion, something strange happened. I saw two forms." Sirius gasped.

"But that's not possible."

"Yeah, I know. That's why we used the other methods. We thought it was an anomaly, or that the potion wasn't brewed correctly. We went through all the other methods. It wasn't a mistake. They all showed that Neville had one and I had two forms."

"You're telling me that you do have two forms?" Sirius asked as if not believing it. "Cool. What is the other one?"

"I think it's some kind of feline, a panther or something similar maybe."

"Have you asked anybody else about it?"

"No. But we have read every book or bit of information on Animagus available in Hogwarts. They all talk about a form, in singular, but we haven't found anything that states explicitly that having more than one form is impossible."

"We even pointed the fact that it was possible to have more than one form during the Transfiguration class, but Potter dismissed the possibility immediately." added Neville.

"Well, you have two forms. You need to stop thinking about it as a problem and start looking at it as some kind of gift. Just work on this unknown extra form and I'm sure you'll discover it eventually."

"I know, and I have been working on it for many weeks, but with very little success. I only manage some little improvement every once in a while."

"It happened the same to me. My form wasn't clear and no matter how hard I tried I didn't come any closer. I thought I would never manage it. Wormtail and Prongs had discovered their forms and were very advanced in their transformations. I felt as if I wasn't up to the task. One day I kind of gave up. I was going through a rough couple of months. My stupid family trying to be friendly with me again so I would join Voldemort, I had OWLs... I thought it wasn't worth my time. When that year ended, I started trying again. It came naturally. I discovered I was a dog in a couple of days and by the end of summer I was at Prongs' and Wormtail's level."

"So you suggest I take a break from it?"

"Yes. You could try. When I was under pressure during those days I wasn't able to discover my single form. You have twice as much, so I would advise you to take it slowly. Don't give up."

"I'll give that a try if nothing else works."

"Ok. So about those nicknames..." Sirius started, rubbing his hands.

"I've already been thinking about that." Harry said.

"Yeah? And what did you come up with?" asked Neville.

"I think we should name you Socks."

"Socks?" yelled Neville indignantly.

"Transform for a moment Nev." Harry said with a smile. Neville did so and Harry proceeded to point out that while most of his fur was grey, the lower parts of his paws were white, resembling socks.

"It's a pretty clever name. No one should be able to easily relate it to a wolf." Sirius said.

"Ok." Neville gave in, still not completely convinced. "But it'll be Sox, rather than Socks. That way's cooler."

"Okay, Sox." Harry agreed laughing.

"So what about your name?" Sirius asked.

"I've come up with two. Raptor, or Falco."

"Falco, I like it. I'm not convinced about the other one."

"Neither am I." said Neville. "Too aggressive. I like Falco better."

"Well raptors are supposed to be aggressive. They're sky's predators."

"I still like Falco better."

"How about Horus?" Sirius proposed. "It was the Egyptian God of the sky. He had a human body with a falcon's head."

"I like it. It reflects that I'm a human being who's able to transform into a falcon. Sirius, I really love it. I think I'll go by that."

"Horus is a literal translation for falcon too, I think." Neville added.

"It is. I'm glad you like it Harry." Sirius said with a sincere smile. "Now for your other form I think-"

"Sirius I don't even know what it is."

"That doesn't mean we can't think of names for them."

"Not now Padfoot. Let's wait until I've mastered it. Besides, it'd be best if we get going, or at least I get going. It would look too suspicious if I return when all students do."

"Ok, let's go." said Sirius reluctantly while getting up and then leading the two teenagers back to the village. "But you're going to get into trouble anyway. Your father asked me, in a rather impolite manner, where you were. So he knows you left the castle."

"Too bad he can't prove it. He'll only have the map as evidence. Then it'll be his word against mine. I wonder if the Board of Governors would be pleased to find out that he has such an artifact."

"So you're planning to blackmail him?"

"I could try, but I'm not sure if it would work. If I went to the Board my father would waste no time in hiding it until it all settles down again."

"I'd love to see his face if you do."

"I'll make sure to store the memory."

"Ah, before you leave, I wanted to give you these." he said taking out from his cloak three mirrors.

"What are they?" asked Neville.

"They are charmed mirrors. Whenever you want to talk to me you say my name to the mirror and I will appear in it."

"How will you know we're calling?"

"Oh it'll start heating and vibrating."

"I don't know what to say Padfoot. Thanks, I guess."

"Yeah thanks Mr. Black." Neville said.

"Don't call me Mr. Black." Sirius cried in mock outrage. "I'm not that old, and it makes me feel like it."

"So we better get going." said Harry, who walked towards his godfather and embraced him. Neville simply held his hand out for Sirius to shake. Then they parted ways. Sirius was taking a portkey from his cloak that would take him home, while Harry and Neville walked towards the Three Broomsticks.

"And Sirius?" Harry called to his godfather before he was able to activate it. "We play against Gryffindor a couple of weeks after the Christmas holidays."

"I'll be there! Just send me a letter with the date and time. Or even better, use the mirrors to tell me!" he cried back cheerfully and then, disappeared.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Hope you liked it guys.

## Chapter 7: One Heated Argument

Harry and Neville made their way towards the path that led back to Hogwarts. They followed the tree line at the edge of the forest in case Harry had to hide from view should anyone appear. Nobody aside from Sirius and Neville had seen Harry in Hogsmeade, and it had to continue that way if he didn't want to get severely punished for disobeying the people who called themselves his parents. Harry doubted it would involve a ridiculous amount of points being taken off and a couple of detentions. This time he had gone against their wishes. No, not their wishes. It had sounded more like orders. They had forbidden him from coming to Hogsmeade and he had openly defied them by coming. Now he feared that his spot on the Quidditch Team might be what his parents would use to punish him. If it came to that he intended to blackmail his father. He had dreamt of this opportunity, and he wasn't about to lose it. Not if he could do something about it.

When they were nearly there, they heard sobs. Faint at first, but they became gradually louder. They stopped and watched the start of the pathway. Nobody was heading to the castle yet, but someone was definitely walking in that direction. They waited for a few seconds, concealed in the forest's undergrowth, waiting for whoever it was to walk past them so they could get back to the castle unnoticed. After a brief wait, Hannah Abbott emerged at the bend of the twisting path. She was clearly heading back to the castle. The poor girl was wiping her tears repeatedly while she continued to sob. Harry instantly concealed himself behind a couple of trees while Neville just stood there watching her, with a sympathetic look that then turned to rage. He had fancied Hannah Abbott since last year, but she didn't notice poor Neville.

"Isn't that Hannah, Nev?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yes..." Neville replied, his eyes never leaving Hannah.

"She seems quite upset. I wonder what happened." Harry commented.

"Probably your brother." said Neville with gritted teeth. "She was his date." Harry's look then turned to a murderous one. They remained for a few seconds silently observing her.

"Nev, I can fly from here. No one will see me transform. You could head back with Hannah. This could be your chance."

"What? What are you talking about?" Neville stuttered.

"Come on Nev, I've noticed the way you look at her. You fancy her." he said grinning and making his friend blush.

"Well I've noticed that you're paying attention to a certain someone too." Now it was Harry's turn to blush.

"I don't know what you're talking about." he said rapidly and very unconvincingly.

"Yes you do. Every time Wilkinson is around you can't stop staring at her."

"Well ok, but she's not here now, Hannah is. Come on, walk her up to the castle." he said pushing him in her direction.

"Are you crazy?" Neville hissed at him. "I bet she doesn't know I even exist."

"Come on we've shared classes with her for more than four years and she doesn't know you? If you go to her now, she'll notice you exist, believe me."

"Are you sure of this? And what should I say? We don't even know why she's so upset. Your brother might not have anything to do with it."

Harry raised his eyebrows at Neville. "Come on Nev! You know that Karl's the reason she's so upset. It'll do her good to have someone who also hates Karl to talk to right now."

"Ok, fine. I'll do it." he said walking towards the pathway.

"And Nev, don't be too direct. Just be a little tactful." Harry recommended him.

Neville took a sharp breath. "Ok." he said. Then he started sprinting towards the Hufflepuff girl so he could catch up.



"Good luck." said Harry in a low voice that only he heard.

After that he started walking deeper and deeper into the woods in case someone had followed him. When he was sure he was alone and nobody was watching him, he transformed into the falcon and took off, heading back to the Astronomy tower.

.o0o.

Hannah Abbott couldn't stop crying. She had just had the worse date of her life with the guy that presumably had to be the best. Karl Potter, a name she had respected greatly for many years. But now, after this date it would be a name she would despise for the rest of her life. She now realized that she had been biased towards the Gryffindor brat, as had been everybody. It shamed her to remember the countless times she had sprung to the defense of the Boy-Who-Lived every time that someone called in question his actions.

Although not many people dared to defy Karl Potter, there had always been a small group that hated him, as should every normal person if it weren't for the press, undoubtedly bribed by the Potters, this was clear to her now. On one side of this little 'resistance group' was Draco Malfoy and his Slytherins, a pureblooded wizard of her year that took his father's word as law and that was clear he would join the Dark Lord Voldemort once he finished school. He was always connected to any 'attack' that the Gryffindor Golden Boy suffered at school.

On the other side, Harry, who was Karl's older twin, although only for a few minutes, and his friend Neville Longbottom, who lived with his grandmother, for reasons she didn't know, just seemed to be the ones to ignore Karl. This only infuriated the Boy-Who-Lived, who was always eager to try and pick a fight with them or play some serious pranks on them. The first few years they got into a couple of fights, which Harry and Neville lost badly. But this year, they seemed different. Karl had continued to pick on them, but he always seemed to leave them alone after he had exchanged a few insults with them. Furthermore, he and his cronies weren't able to prank them anymore. They always seemed to know when, where and how they were going to be pranked. If she didn't know better, she'd say that Karl and his goons had become wary of the pair.

"Hey Hannah!" cried a voice behind her. She turned to see Neville heading her way. Speak of the devil...

"Um, hi... Longbottom." she said after wiping her tears discreetly while he approached her. "What are you doing here?"

"Going back to the castle..." Neville replied as if it was evident. "Hannah, are you all right?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" she lied.

"Well, your eyes are all teary, and you're heading back to the castle early, and all alone..."

"I just had a really bad date. That's all." she replied a bit rudely. She wasn't in the mood right now to talk to Longbottom, a student that she had very little contact with although he was from her own year and House.

"Let me guess. Potter?" asked Neville, although it was more of an affirmation. She looked up at him with a questioning glance.

"How did you know?"

"Well, Karl Potter's dates aren't exactly a secret in the school. That and that many girls end up in a similar way after he goes with them on dates."

"I know. Either they end up in his arms or upset as I am right now. But I didn't mind that the moment he asked me. I didn't want to believe it, or maybe I thought it would be different with me... I'm not speaking to him ever again, in my whole life."

"Good for you then." Neville said with a reassuring smile.

"I don't know how I could be so blind." Hannah continued to rant. "I wish I had realized sooner how arrogant and self-centered he is."

"And don't forget, liar and spoiled."

"Yeah, that too." she said with a small smile. "So why are you also heading back alone to the castle? Where's Potter's brother?"

"Harry? Back at the castle. His father banned him from coming to Hogsmeade. Didn't you notice the argument he had with his parents this morning? It was hard to miss..."

"Yes I did. But do you expect me to believe that he stayed at the castle and you came down here all alone?" Neville didn't answer. He only shrugged and looked away.

"All right, keep your secrets. I wasn't going to tell anyone anyway. So what was their argument about? I only heard the last of it."

"We were supposed to meet a friend of Harry's. One who doesn't have the sympathy of Professor Potter. So he banned him from coming down to meet him. He was Professor Potter's best friend when they were young. His name is Sirius Black." he said casually. She gasped. "He is Harry's godfather."

"Sirius Black? Wasn't he one of the Marauders?" she asked.

"Yeah." he said and they fell into a brief silence, Neville considering what to tell Hannah without betraying the trust Harry had placed upon him by telling him everything about his life before Hogwarts. Hannah meanwhile was starting to see more clearly what kind of people the Potters were, although it was hard to imagine. Everyone loved them.

"How could someone forbid his son from seeing his own Godfather?"

"Potter and Black had a fight some years ago concerning Harry."

"What happened?" she asked, making Neville hesitate.

"Er... Listen Hannah, I really shouldn't tell. That's Harry's business, I have spoken too much already. Just know that growing up under the shadow of the Boy-Who-Lived wasn't a very pleasant experience for Harry."

"I can imagine that." she said sympathetically.

At this point they were already entering the castle's Entrance Hall and they had fallen into an awkward silence for a few seconds, not really knowing what to say to each other. Neville was especially

nervous, although it didn't show in his features. He was about to say something stupid or ridiculous to try and start the conversation when they heard a heated argument starting in the corridor that lead to the stairs. They stopped in their tracks and tried to listen. At first they couldn't discern the voice, so they got closer. With every step the voices became clearer and Neville and Hannah recognized them.

.o0o.

Harry landed gracefully on the Astronomy Tower after spending a bit more time than he should have had flying over the school's grounds and the Forbidden Forest. He had given some of the school owls quite a scare when he dived near them at great speeds. The Peregrine Falcon was after all one of the deadliest predators in the air. He changed back effortlessly and headed down to the Entrance Hall to meet Neville. Hopefully he hasn't said or done anything stupid, he thought. Neville was once very shy and had little confidence on himself, as Harry had also been. The past few years had changed this, but they were still nervous around pretty girls they fancied, as many teenagers were. He stopped at his common room and dumped Sirius' mirrors into a secret locker he and Neville used to store things safely. Things that shouldn't fall in nobody's hands but theirs.

From the window he looked down to the Hogsmeade path and saw the students walking to and from the castle. He couldn't differentiate them from this distance, at least not with his current vision. He performed the first step of the Animagus transformation, the one concerning the mind. The second one involved changing physically. With only the first step, one would gain the characteristic traits and instincts from his form, in Harry's case, the instincts to fly, to hunt, and more importantly right now, the enhanced sight from the falcon.

He felt as his eyes prickled for a moment and then his eyesight improved instantly. He looked down at the path again. This time he was able to see clearly Hannah and Neville, walking towards the castle side by side. He smiled. He was happy for Neville. His friend seemed to be enjoying a nice conversation with the girl he had fancied for some time now. Harry decided he wouldn't intrude their conversation by waiting Neville at the Entrance of the castle so he decided to go down to the kitchens. The snacks Sirius had brought had not been enough to satisfy his hunger and Neville would probably feel the same so he would find him there.

On his way down, when he was nearing the Entrance Hall, a wall suddenly opened at his side and from it emerged a fuming James Potter with her wife and son in tow. Harry tried to walk the other way and make as if he hadn't seen them. It didn't work out.

"Harry!" James called out after him. From the tone of his voice Harry could tell he was angry.

"Yes, father?" Harry asked looking innocent although it was pretty clear to him that they knew he had left the castle.

"You and I are going to have words." he said angrily striding towards him.

"What about?" he asked politely.

"Don't play dumb with us Harry. We know that you left the castle against our wishes." her mother reprimanded.

"I did not!" Harry defended himself.

"Of course you did!" Karl said bitinglly.

"Prove it." he said quietly with a shrug, earning a murderous look from his father.

"What did you just say?" he asked looking really angry. "What did we teach about talking to your elders?"

"You haven't taught me anything in my whole aside from arrogance and selfishness."

"See, Lily?" James said turning to his wife. "Those were Black's same words when he dared lecture us about how to bring up our sons after that night after Harry's incident with his broom."

"Why, father, must you think everything I do and say comes from him?" Harry asked looking disappointed.

"Because I haven't forgotten what he told us that night!" James yelled at him.

"What did he say?" Harry asked taking a step forward. When he was little he had overheard part from that argument, but not all of it. He had always known he had missed on something important but Sirius had never agreed to tell him.

"Nothing you should worry about." James told him. "Anyway, I explicitly told you not to meet him, or write to him, or have contact with him in any way. You disobeyed me."

"I did not. He was the one to write to me." Harry lied. "I hadn't written to him."

"Even if that was true you went to Hogsmeade to meet him."

"I already told you I—"

"We saw you in the Map, Harry." Lily cut in. "So don't you dare to lie to us again."

"So you're going to punish me because you assume I went against your wishes. The Map may not work properly. Would it be fair for me if that was the case?"

"The Map works properly." James said forcefully. "And let me tell you that if you ever try to lie to us again about Black and take us for fools, your punishment will far exceed the one I'm gonna give you know."

"Is that a threat?" Harry asked, showing some of his cocky side.

"You bet." James told him dangerously. It was obvious he hadn't liked one bit Harry's comeback.

Harry smirked at him. "If you punish me I'll tell the Board of Governors, and anyone who cares, about your little Map." James and Karl's faces went pale. "I wonder how will the parents of the students will react to the news of their teacher having such a device. When you were a student it was different, but now you're a teacher. Not even the Headmaster is allowed to control in such a way his students, although I strongly suspect he does anyway. Come to think about it, you're already suspended from the DMLE. This could very well mean the end of your career." By now all of his family's

faces were red with anger. "See father, that's how you seriously threaten someone." Harry told him with a subtle hint of mockery.

"You ungrateful brat!" Lily hissed angrily, slapping him across the face.

"Maybe we could have that friend of yours expelled for attacking Karl and Ron." James said with a malicious look. Apparently he had learned how to make threats in no time. Now Harry found himself between a rock and a hard place.

"Again, I know not of what you are speaking."

"Oh yes you do. The Quidditch Pitch, this morning. That coward, Longbottom, he jinxed us." said Karl raising his voice.

"That's a lie." a voice said from behind them.

They all turned to see Neville standing beside Hannah Abbott. They had heard part of the argument. Karl flashed an evil smirk at Hannah who felt nauseated.

"What did you say Mr. Longbottom?" asked James, his anger rising.

"I said that Karl Potter is a liar." said Neville evenly. "I did no such thing."

"Yes you did! I saw you do it Longbottom!" Karl yelled, his face red with anger. Harry smirked.

"You want to show us your memories of the event, brother?" he said. That shut him up.

"That won't be necessary. Mr. Longbottom!" James barked. "Your wand."

Neville hesitated before handing it over to James. He eyed it for a moment checked it for the last spells used.

"Priori Incantatem." he said while waving Neville's wand. Instantly a short list started forming in the air along with dates and times, each indicating the use of spells, curses and charms. Much to James' dismay, not a single Petrificus Totalus appeared.

"I told you so." Neville said evenly.

"Well, there's still the matter that he sneaked into Hogsmeade without permission!" said an angry Karl pointing with an accusatory finger at his brother.

"That isn't true either." said Hannah, surprising everyone.

"What?" Karl said. "Of course he did. Black was there to meet with him." he said to his father.

"I am certain that Harry didn't meet with Mr. Black." Hannah said.

"And how is that Ms. Abbott?" asked Lily condescendingly.

"Because I went to Hogsmeade with Neville as my date and we spent most of our time with Mr. Black. And Harry wasn't there."

This statement provoked many reactions. Neville blushed at the words 'Neville', 'my' and 'date' when said in the same phrase by her. Harry looked surprised and then grateful, although he didn't understand why was she helping him out. Karl was instantly consumed by rage and was about to say something when James beat him to it.

"Your date..."he said disbelievingly. "You went on a date with him and then you spend most of the day with a third person? What kind of date is that?"

"I really wanted to meet the best of the Marauders." she said looking at him in the eye. James eyes widened at the insult, and Karl was watching the exchange with his mouth wide opened. He was the one that had gone with her. She was outright lying! "So when I found out that Neville knew him I asked if I could meet him."

"You're lying!" yelled Karl taking a few steps towards her. Neville immediately took two steps forward, placing himself between them. "I was your date. You came with me! Dad, she's lying."

"No, I'm not." replied Hannah, with some tears starting to form in his eyes.



"Yes you are!"

"Why don't you show your parents your memories from today Potter?" she said in a cold voice. Tears were now flowing freely from her eyes.

Karl froze at those words and then resumed his angry expression. He remained silent for a few seconds in which he opened his mouth to say something a couple of times but wisely any words didn't come out. He spared a glance at his parents, and scowled at the other students before turning on his heel and stalking away. James threw a murderous look at the three of them, one which Harry and Neville were already familiar with. Then the Potters followed his son down the corridor. Tears were now leaving Hannah's blue eyes. Neville made to comfort her but she backed away.

"I'm sorry." she said, and then left towards the Hufflepuff Common room.

"What do you think that happened between her and your brother?" Neville asked, looking at her retreating back.

"I don't know. But it's pretty obvious that whatever it was is something serious."

"You think I should...?" Neville said indicating the retreating girl.

"No." said Harry. "I think it's best to let her be for a while and talk to her later."

"Ok. Maybe you're right and it's better this way."

"Care to join me for a quick dinner at the kitchens?"

"Sure. I'm pretty hungry myself. Those snacks Sirius brought weren't that good."

After that they walked for a few minutes in silence until Harry broke the silence just before arriving to the kitchens portrait.

"Nev, how did Hannah know about Sirius?" he asked his mate. Neville's expression lost some of its color and he looked a little bit ashamed.

"I'm sorry Harry. I know you don't like people knowing about your 'real' life at home. I apologize for telling about him to Hannah." The apology surprised Harry, who hadn't asked the question in a reprimanding tone. He was only curious, and he didn't mind that Hannah knew. She had proved his new hatred towards the Potters, so he considered her, not as a friend as he didn't really know her, but a person wiser than all those who worshiped his brother.

"Don't worry my friend. I'm not mad. In fact I am grateful that you did. My parents would have punished me some way or another, and because I didn't have a solid enough alibi, Dumbledore would have complied. But now, I have someone who confirms I wasn't there."

"After I left you in the forest, when I reached her, she was crying, she was crying a lot. She heard your parents rant during breakfast, so after I had asked why was she so upset she asked me why wasn't I with you at the castle. I had to tell her something. But don't worry I only told her that Sirius was an old friend with whom your father had had a fight, so your family wasn't comfortable with you seeing him."

Harry only nodded in understanding and then tickled the pear that gave entrance to the kitchens.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think! ;)

## Chapter 8: The Potters Conspire

Meanwhile an angry James Potter was stalking towards the Headmaster's Office. His face was contorted with anger at his son's rebelliousness and cocky attitude. How dare he threaten him with going to the Board of Governors! How, dare, he! The students, which were going back to their common rooms to stack away anything they had bought down at Hogsmeade, did their best to stay out of his way upon setting eyes on him, especially the Slytherins. Even when he was in the highest of spirits, it was normal a thing to see James Potter dock off points to Slytherins for ridiculous reasons. This had been so since James had become a teacher here. No-one at the school would have thought to see someone more unfair than Severus Snape regarding house points. Still, nobody complained about it. Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws enjoyed seeing the 'evil' Slytherins being constantly harassed by James after years of oppression by Professor Snape, who was now the one to balance the scales.

When James Potter arrived at the gargoyle he barked the candy-based password at the statue and climbed the stairs that led to the Head office. He heard the words 'come in' even before he was able to knock. It didn't help his current state of anger and irritation. He threw the door open and with angry determination as he walked to the Headmaster's table and started to pace in front of him.

"Ah, James. How can I he-" the Headmaster started to greet him in his grandfatherly tone.

"I want something done with him Dumbledore; I want something done with my son. He thinks he can do what he wants, when he wants, even if it is going against our wishes." James declared angrily. Dumbledore frowned and put his quill down.

"I thought you didn't mind if we gave Karl a little bit of leeway. In fact you encouraged it, if I'm not mistaken." he said with a confused expression.

"I'm not talking about Karl, Albus." he said exasperatedly. "I'm talking about Harry! You remember how I revoked his Hogsmeade privileges this morning at breakfast?"

"Yes. It was quite the scene."

"Well, he went anyway! He blatantly lied at my face when he promised not to go."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. "I see. And why do you come with this to me? I'm sure that if you assigned some detentions...You are his father."

"The problem is that I can't prove it!"

"And you want me to enforce a punishment? How can you be so sure he left the castle?" the old wizard asked. James looked at him nervously for a second.

"Ah..." said Dumbledore with his everlasting twinkle in his eyes. "your old Map. I would think that after all this time you would trust me a little bit more with such trivial matters as this one."

"I'm sorry." said James taking a seat before the Headmaster. "How come you know about it?"

"I've known about it, James, for a really long time now. In fact I learned about it while you were still working on it. I even provided young Mr. Lupin with some useful enchantments to finish it. He never knew that I was helping him willingly."

"You knew?" asked James in disbelief. "You've known about it all of this time?"

"Yes. I even instructed Mr. Filch to give it back to Mr. Black when he confiscated it from him during your fourth year. He was apocalyptically cross with me after that." Dumbledore explained with an amused smile. "Thank Merlin he managed to take it from you again on your last year." James had to bit back a laugh.

"You know, Black told us he had broken into his office. What a bastard." he said half laughing half yelling. "Harry went to see him today. He's been exchanging letters with him too. Dumbledore, Black is trying to turn my son away from his family!"

"Why do you think that?"

"You saw how he reacted when I took his letter from him this morning. He was furious and then he openly defies me by going to Hogsmeade to meet with him! And then he blackmails me. I tell you Dumbledore, your damned Hat should have put him in Slytherin, where he truly belongs. He has an evil heart and Black is responsible for it. Before I severed all ties with him Harry behaved himself and was a normal child, but ever since the day I had the fight with Black, Harry changed. That bastard is corrupting my son!"

"So what would you have me do James?"

"I don't know. Whatever it takes to win him back to our side. It might not be too late."

"Very well. We will have to keep them apart then." Dumbledore came to the conclusion.

"Excellent. I don't want Harry to end up like him. Merlin knows what he gets up to, and I wouldn't put it past him being able to do Dark Magic. He's the last Black, and the Library in his family home has the largest collection on Dark Magic in all England."

"I think that a restraining order would suffice." Dumbledore said after a few seconds' thought.

"A restraining order?"

"Yes. You know, the ones that won't let them have any type of contact-"

"I know what a restraining order is! I was only thinking if the Ministry would grant that."

"If we present enough evidence, then yes, they will. With memories of today, and some more of other days when Harry has reacted badly to the subject, we might get it."

"Which memories would you need?" said James taking out his wand, ready to provide them.

"This morning's argument and the one when he returned. I'll need proof that he spent some time with Sirius. His memory of the event should suffice."

"I don't think he will willingly submit it."

"I didn't think so either, but one way or another we will get it out from him. Once we file the request for the restraining order there may be or may be not a trial. If there is, he will have to submit it as it would be substantial evidence. However, if we present enough evidence, we may get through it without a trial and Mr. Black and you, as the starter of this procedures, would be notified of the new order by owl mail. This is why I'm asking for permission to retrieve that memory from Harry's mind."

"Using Legilimency." James clarified. "Okay. You have it." he said without a second's doubt, and not even making sure Dumbledore wouldn't overstep his boundaries.

"Once I have acquired and inspected all the memories we need, I'll go with you to the Ministry to start all the necessary procedures."

Dumbledore then opened one of his drawers and took out a small piece of parchment and started to write in it.

"Here, give this to Harry." he said handing the note to James. "I'll expect him here tomorrow after lunch."

"Okay, I will see it done." he said heading to the door. He stopped for a moment. "Albus, one more thing. Once we present the evidence, how much time will it take before it's official?"

"One day, at most. If we pull the right strings and call in a few favors."

"All right. Thank you Dumbledore. I really appreciate what you're doing for us."

"Of course." Dumbledore said with a fake smile difficult to distinguish. "I am happy to provide whatever you need, if it is in my power."

.o0o.

Later that night Harry and Neville were relaxing on the two armchairs in the corner of their Common Room. The Hufflepuff Basement, as it was referred to, was situated in the underground

levels of the castle, just above the dungeons where the Slytherins were stationed. The Entrance was beside the fruit portrait that gave access to the kitchens. The common room and the dormitories were connected through a network of tunnels that reminded Harry of Bag End from the Lord the Rings, Frodo Baggins' house. Harry had read the series when he was younger and Sirius walked him back from school. The doors to their dormitories were circular too, as if made from barrel tops, and the beds and armchairs and hangings were decorated in varying degrees of yellow, the color of their House.

Harry was looking through the book that Augusta Longbottom had sent them while Neville sat on his armchair, legs stretched over the armchair across him, and with a Herbology book in his lap. He wasn't reading it. He was just sitting there, glancing occasionally and discreetly at Hannah Abbott, who was sitting with her friends Ernie, Justin and Susan at the other side of the room. Neville and Harry had wisely decided to not to confront her about what had happened with Karl, and wait for her to tell them when she was ready, if she ever told them, because since they had stepped in Hogwarts they hadn't talked with her and her group too much.

The Hufflepuff fifth year was divided in three groups and they had never interacted too much between them; Harry and Neville had been marginalized because of Karl since day one, Megan Jones and Leanne Talley were the Hufflepuff version of Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, who were the resident Gryffindor gossip girls. Justin, Ernie, Susan and Hannah kept mostly to themselves.

"Hey Nev," said Harry breaking all of a sudden the comfortable silence they were in and successfully catching his attention. "you're going home during the Holidays, right?"

"Yes. Wanna come over for some days?" Neville said looking up from his book. "I can write Grandma and ask her."

"Wish I could mate." said Harry sounding disappointed. "My mother told me on Thursday that we're spending Christmas here at Hogwarts."

Neville frowned and closed his book. "Why? You always go back to Potter Manor."

"They've been listening to Dumbledore's babble, again." Harry told him exasperatedly. "Apparently it isn't safe for the great asshole there with Voldemort on the loose."

"No worries then. I'll ask Grandma to stay here." Neville said confidently.

"Nay, we both know that she won't agree. You always go home in Christmas."

"I could pull the same bullshit your parents pulled on you. Do you think she would agree?"

"Maybe, if you ask her politely." Harry said emphasizing the word. Ever since Neville had met Harry and started hating Karl Potter, his relationship with his grandmother had been a little tense at best.

"Okay. I'll owl her after dinner." Neville said with a reassuring look. After that they settled into light reading again. After some minutes Harry noticed Neville was a bit distracted and shifting his attention between his book and somewhere at the other side of the Common Room. He glanced in that direction and saw Hannah Abbott sitting with her friends. Harry observed him for a few more seconds before speaking up.

"Maybe you should just ask her out." Harry said quietly without even looking up from his book.

"What?" Neville blurted out a bit surprised and with a blush forming in his face. "You really think so?"

"Of course." Harry replied, this time looking up from his novel. "But if you don't trust my judgment you can always use the mirrors and talk to Sirius."

"No way! The man's too perverted." he said in horror making Harry laugh.

"I know. Really Nev, I think you should. Maybe next Hogsmeade trip?"

"You know, maybe I will do so."



"Do what?" a voice startled them from behind. Neville turned in his chair and saw Hannah standing beside his armchair with her friends Susan, Ernie and Justin standing beside her.

"Um, nothing." said Neville blushing furiously. Thankfully the light the fire provided wasn't much and made his blush go unnoticed.

"Mind if we sit?" she said pointing towards Neville's legs on the armchair.

"Oh, yes. Sorry. Of course you can!" he said very fast. Harry sat watching the exchange amused and barely able to contain his laughter.

"So what brings you here?" said Harry in a tone a little bit too cold and formal than he intended to.

"I've..." Hannah started but received a nudge from Susan. "we've, come to apologize."

"Apologize?" asked Harry, a tad confused.

"Yes. I know that we have ignored and treated you like dirt because of your brother for many years now." she said.

"His lies and his threats to all Hufflepuffs blinded us." Ernie added.

"They blinded you and all Hogwarts population. It's easier to believe a lie that one has heard a thousand times than to believe a fact that no one has heard before." Harry declared.

"Yes, but now I have seen clearly with my own eyes how he really is and what he's worth. Anyway, we shouldn't have acted as we did. For that we wanted to apologize." she finished solemnly.

"You saved my neck earlier." Harry told her. "Why?"

"Why did I lie for you? We heard the conversation from the very beginning." she said gesturing towards Neville. "I heard the tone in which they talked to you, and after what Karl-" she paused, but then, after taking a deep breath continued and a little reassurance from her friends. "-after what he did to me, I wanted that jerk and his

arrogant family being brought down a peg or two. I know I wouldn't get away for hexing him."

"You know that he is probably badmouthing you right now." said Harry.

"Maybe inventing a story of what happened today between you." added Neville.

"I know. But the people close to me already know what happened really." she said looking at her friends.

"That's all that matters. As long as you have a little patience and someone who cares for you knows the truth and supports you, you'll be okay. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about." said Harry solemnly and with a distant look in his eyes.

"I know." she said, her head low. She was ashamed that he had treated Harry and Neville the way that many people was going to treat her know.

"You'll have to watch out in Charms and Transfiguration." said Neville. "The rest of you also need to do that. Being friends with Harry has earned me the animosity of his parents. What you've done today is like declaring war to the Potters. They might treat you worse than Snape treats his brother."

"We know that." said Justin. "But after what that bastard did to Hannah, we don't care."

"We are trying to convince her to file charges against him. But she won't listen." explained Susan.

"It's an effective manner of losing money and time." said Neville. "Many people have gone against the Potters. With their money and influence they get away with everything. Much like the Malfoys."

"That's what I tried to explain them." Hannah said defensively.

"Excuse me." said Harry suddenly sitting up and leaving the common room.

"Did I say something?" inquired Hannah when Harry was well out of earshot.

"No don't worry. He doesn't like people talking badly about his family in front of him."

"But I thought he hated them." said Ernie confused. "Why would that anger him?"

"It doesn't anger him. He is only sad he doesn't have any reason to defend his family. He knows them better than anyone else and wishes they would be normal and caring parents. It's not anger, it's sadness, and regret for not having a family that really loves him."

.oOo.

James Potter entered his quarters a while after he had talked to Dumbledore explaining his and his family's concerns over Harry's relationship with Sirius Black. There he found her wife, Lily, sitting by the fire and with a pile of essays resting on her lap. His son, Karl, was there too. Apparently he had only been there waiting for him so he could get the Map back.

"So what did Albus have to say?" asked Lily when James sat in the armchair opposite hers.

"He'll help us. Actually he has come up with a good solution. A restraining order."

"That could actually work." Lily said thoughtfully. "All we need is proof that he's been corrupting our son. A few memories that show how he was before your fight with Sirius and some after should do the trick."

"I've already given Dumbledore those, but he wants to be sure, so he'll be getting what happened today from Harry's mind. He'll get their meeting at Hogsmeade so we can have enough evidence to avoid a trial. I've already given Albus our parental consent to use Legilimency. Harry won't give them up willingly."

"No, he will most certainly not." Lily agreed looking disappointed. "How soon will this matter be settled?"

"He told me he'll call up Harry to his office after lunch tomorrow. Then a day at the very least until it's confirmed by the Ministry and made official. It shouldn't take more than two."

"And what are we going to do about Harry? The memory that Dumbledore will retrieve from his mind will show us how he met Sirius Black. He disobeyed our explicit orders. I'd have him punished and see if he finally learns some discipline and respect."

"What punishment were you thinking about?" James asked his wife.

"I think that you could ban him from playing Quidditch." Karl piped in as he made his way out of the room..

"It is a possibility." James agreed when his son was gone.

"You don't think he would really carry out his threat?" Lily asked concerned.

"No, not really. And if he does, it would be my word against his. We could easily deny the Map's existence and hide it until everything calms down."

"I just wish he stopped being so difficult. I wish he was more like his brother." Lily said quietly.

"Don't worry Lils. After being isolated from Sirius Black's influence he'll realize what he's done and how he's been behaving, and then, everything will go back to the way it should have always been."

.oOo.

The following day, Harry and Neville entered the Great Hall at lunchtime after a taxing workout. They had slept in but nonetheless, they hadn't skipped their daily workout. They took their usual places at the end of the Hufflepuff table and started to fill their plates. An intense workout always got them hungry. Harry took out the feline book while they were eating, opened it at a certain page and tossed it to Neville after he had looked sideways to check that nobody was eavesdropping.

"I think I might be some sort of panther." he announced quietly yet quite excitedly while Neville looked at the pictures of the animal.

"It is a very cool form." Neville agreed. "Are you sure this is your Animagus form?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. But anyway, I plan on following Padfoot's advice and giving it a rest for a couple of weeks."

"That way you can concentrate on the next Quidditch match."

"That's a must if we expect to compete for the Cup this year. We lost the first match 60 – 250 against Slytherin, and the Gryffindorks won Ravenclaw by 160 - 90. We have to win the next match against Gryffindor, if not, we're out of the run for the Cup. But don't worry, I expect to kick Karl's ass. Pity he isn't a Seeker though. It would look far better when I caught the Snitch right under his nose."

"Confident are we?" Neville asked smirking.

"Of course!" Harry replied whilst smiling, but the smile faltered a fraction of a second later and turned into a groan. "Oh, not again."

"What?" said Neville, turning around in his seat to find out what was bothering him. A feeling of Deja Vu overwhelmed him. He saw James and Lily Potter walking down the aisle towards them just as they had done the day before.

"What do they want now?" Harry inquired quietly not really expecting Neville to answer. His friend only shrugged.

"Good afternoon Mr. Potter." said James in a formal tone whilst giving him a small piece of parchment. "The Headmaster expects you at his office once you have ended your lunch."

"What does he want?" said Harry coldly.

"Just don't be late." was said Lily placing a hand on his shoulder. Harry quickly shrugged it off and looked with a scowl at her retreating back.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think! ;)

## Chapter 9: The Headmaster

Harry walked confidently towards the Headmaster's office after having finished lunch, thinking about what the old man might want to talk him about. Of one thing he was absolutely positive. It would have something to do with his parents and what had happened the day before. Dumbledore didn't waste his time with people who he thought to be under him or of no use to him. Dumbledore thought very lowly of Harry, as he had showed time and time again during his pre-Hogwarts years. He had even implied that he might be a squib when Harry and Karl were young and only Karl had done accidental magic. The day he demonstrated his family, and Dumbledore, that he was not, had been one of the best moments of his life. A Patronus memory, definitely. What he had enjoyed most was the shocked look of the Headmaster and his parents. So whatever the reason why the Headmaster had called for him, it was because he needed something from him, or needed Harry to do something.

He arrived before the statue that led to the old man's office. He took the piece of parchment he had received from his father during lunch and checked the password. A candy-based password surely made the impression of a kind hearted man, but it wouldn't fool him. Harry knew that the man's manipulations were the reason he had lived such a sad childhood.

"Liquorice wands." he said to the gargoyle, which instantly moved to its right and permitted Harry to climb through the stairs.

He arrived at the top of the stairs and he saw a rune carved into the tiles near to the office's door. Harry and Neville had a decent knowledge of Magical Runes although they were not in the class. At the start of third year they had decided that they had far too many classes with Karl Potter, so they went for an easy one instead of Ancient Runes, the subject the Potters had advised Karl to take. This 'easy' subject Harry and Neville signed up for had been one which they both came to hate with passion after the first few classes: Divination.

At the start of fifth year, however, when they decided to study more and train, they had started to study runes and were now fairly knowledgeable of them. When Harry saw the rune before Dumbledore's door, he recognized it immediately. It was an

identification rune. One of the greatest mysteries of Dumbledore, his ability to know who was coming into his office beforehand, was a simple rune that alerted him every time someone stepped onto it. He was surprised that nobody had noticed it before, not even the Ancient Runes Professors. Harry decided to irritate the old man and knocked on the door without directly stepping onto the rune, but rather putting carefully his feet at each side of it. Instead of the usual 'Come on in, and whatever your name was' he only heard some hurried footsteps before the door opened swiftly and Dumbledore emerged from it looking slightly confused. Harry didn't miss the discreet glance the old wizard made to the floor.

"Something wrong, Headmaster?" he said respectfully while laughing inwardly.

"No." said Dumbledore, suddenly changing to his friendly smile once more. "Not at all, my boy. Please, do come in Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore ushered him inside and closed the door behind him. They both sat and Dumbledore began his usual offerings of tea, biscuits and lemon drops, all of which Harry declined politely while inwardly fuming. He had been warned beforehand of the substances that Dumbledore added to those treats. Sirius had explained him in shame and indignation how he had talked to Dumbledore about the Marauder's Map under a mild truth serum during his fourth year.

"Let's get down to the point then, Harry." Dumbledore said calmly. "I assume you're asking yourself why I have called for you. Am I right?"

Harry's only response was a shrug.

"Your parents are worried about you Harry."

Harry smiled. He had thought it might be something like that. "I seriously doubt that." he told the old Headmaster.

"Why is that?" Dumbledore asked in an innocent tone.

Harry only smirked at the poor and innocent acting of the Headmaster. He wondered how people could actually fall for it.

"I don't know what reasons you have to say that, Harry, but I can assure you that they do care for you. In fact they are concerned with some of the people you're friends with. They think it's influencing you rather badly."

"You're talking about Neville? I hardly think he's a bad influence for me." Harry said with a slight smirk.

"I wasn't talking about young Mr. Longbottom. I was in fact referring to Mr. Black."

"And what's so bad about him?" asked Harry.

"I've been informed that you are very close to him." Dumbledore said tentatively.

"Your point?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Your parents are not happy with you seeing him. What you did yesterday, sneaking out of the castle like that-"

"I didn't leave the castle at all." Harry said evenly.

"Your father seems convinced that you did."

"My father is wrong then." he replied calmly. "I spent all day studying in my room. I didn't set foot in Hogsmeade." he lied.

"Can someone corroborate that?"

Harry shrugged and quickly shook his head. "No. I was on my own."

"If that is true you wouldn't mind submitting a memory of your study session then." Dumbledore said with a polite smile as if it was nothing to worry about.

"I've no reason to submit anything. This is not a trial, Professor. And even if it was, people are innocent until proven guilty, not the other way round. Oh, don't look at me like that Professor. I know that this memory is the reason you made me come up here. You're a Master Legilimens. My parents wouldn't have involved you if all they wanted is to tell me off like a little child. I know what you're doing. You want that memory so my father can rightfully punish me."



"So you're not willing to give me your memory then." the Headmaster said looking disappointed.

"Not a chance." Harry said leaning back into his chair and folding his arms across his chest.

"Then I must say I'm very sorry, Harry." said Dumbledore in an apologetic tone as he laid down his glasses.

"Sorry for what?" Harry asked trying to sound naïve, although he already knew the answer and was bracing himself for the Legilimency attack that Dumbledore was milliseconds away from launching.

## Flashback

Harry arrived to his room after having left the conversation with Neville and a bunch of other Hufflepuffs that had decided to apologize to them down at the Common Room. He sat on his bed with his head resting in his hands. He hated when people talked about the Potters. Whether they talked about how perfect they were or they criticized them for the very same reasons other venerated them, Harry would always become somewhat upset. The first group of people irritated him because they were the kind of ass-licking bastards who idolized Karl and his parents for their Gryffindorish style of life while they ignored him. This, apart from upsetting him, angered him. The second group, who hated the Potters, made Harry realize that he had a family that was beyond redemption and that those people were right and he would never have a family who really cared for him.

Irritated, Harry observed the room while these thoughts raced through his mind. He only found a little peace in his mind when he saw the mirrors Sirius had given him and Neville a while ago in the forest. He immediately lightened up and took one into his hands. He spoke his godfather's name clearly to it. After a few seconds Sirius' face appeared in it, sporting a foolish grin in it.

"Hey what's up kiddo? Why are you calling me so soon? Missed me much?" he said cheekily.

"You wish." Harry said as he smiled. His Godfather always managed to cheer him up. "I only wanted to test them. See if they worked properly."

"Okay. So they do... Now, did your parents yell very much at you?"

Harry let out a huff. "Quite a bit yeah, although I'm proud to say I won the yelling contest."

"Well done. It's no simple feat to, 'outyell' Lily Potter!"

"Outyell?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It's a word!" Sirius claimed.

"Whatever." Harry said with an amused smile. "It was not her doing the yelling. It was my father mostly. They knew through the Map that I had left. I told them they can't prove anything with it, so he threatened me with taking me off the Quidditch Team."

"Well at least they didn't threaten you with pulling you off the school." Sirius said thoughtfully. "That's what happened to the previous Seeker wasn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Anyway, I threatened him with bringing the Map to the Board of Governors."

"You didn't!" Sirius said with awe in his voice.

"I did. Father's look was murderous. I think it may have done more wrong than right, though. Besides, it's an empty threat. He would only have to hide it and no-one would be the wiser. It would be his word against mine and he would still end up punishing me."

"Don't worry about it Harry. It takes a serious offence to pull someone off the Quidditch team, so as long as James and Lily can't prove you disobeyed them, they can't do it."

"It's not them I'm worried about. It's Dumbledore. I fear he might take the memory out of my mind so my father can have his way and punish me. Merlin knows that Dumbledore has put up with many of my family's outrageous and outlandish demands so he can have some type of control over the Boy-Who-Lived."

"I think he does that to instill them with a false sense of dependence. Whenever they need help they go to him. That way he's always updated about Karl and has a say in some things that concern his life."

"To think that could have been me if Voldemort chose to finish me off first... Anyway, what can I do about Dumbledore? I really don't want him in my head. I don't want anyone to know about my Animagus abilities."

"You shouldn't worry much about that either. If Dumbledore speaks to you just block his Legilimency attack and use the mirror to call me right away." said Sirius as if it was an obvious thing.

"How could I possibly do that? I'm not an Occlumens. Neville and I tried studying Occlumency, but we're not as gifted in that art as we are in the Animagus transformations."

"That's a natural thing." Sirius said smiling. "You can't accomplish Occlumency if you're an Animagus."

"Why not?" Harry asked curiously.

"You know the two steps of the transformation, right?"

"Yes. The mental one and the physical." replied Harry. "You can't transform physically if you haven't accomplished the mental part before."

"That's right. A mental transformation provides you with a natural barrier of Occlumency, one of the strongest ones in fact."

"How is that?" Harry asked intrigued.

"Think of your mind as if it was a book written in a certain language. When you're in your 'human' mind state, not having transformed, you could say it is written in human language. So any human who knows Legilimency could enter your mind and read your 'book'. But when you transform into your falcon form, the language on your 'book' turns into the falcon language, so a human who reads your mind wouldn't understand a thing."

"Cool." said Harry in awe.

"However, there is a catch, although it's a small one. Animagus can read other animagus' minds if their forms are related and they are both mentally transformed. Like a falcon with an eagle, a cat with a tiger, a dog with a wolf, a zebra with a horse."

"So it won't mind if I transform mentally if Dumbledore's form is a bird. He'll be able to read me anyway."

"No, because Dumbledore isn't an Animagus. He's an Occlumens. They are not compatible magics."

"But Padfoot, won't it give away I'm an Animagus if I use this type of mind defense?"

"Not at all. Anyone who is trying to read your mind will mistake it for a weird Occlumency barrier. I came across this type of defense a few years ago going through the Library of my family. I found it in a really old book that pertained to one of my ancestors. I doubt Dumbledore knows about it. So remember Harry, whenever Dumbledore approaches you, first try and avoid visual contact and then transform mentally immediately."

"Thanks Padfoot, I'll keep that in mind."

End flashback

"Then I must say I'm very sorry, Harry." said Dumbledore in a sad tone.

"Sorry for what?" Harry asked feigning ignorance, but Dumbledore, too busy focusing on Harry's mind, ignored the question.

He saw Harry tense up the moment he entered his mind. He didn't expect what he found in there though. Harry's mind had the same structure that any mind from a teenager would have. It was untidy and unorganized. A clear sign that the boy hadn't learnt Occlumency. However, all memories in front of him were blurry and their sound was undistinguishable. So what kind of mind defense was this? Dumbledore didn't understand. He had access to even the deepest secrets of Harry Potter, yet he was unable to see and understand them properly. Dumbledore wondered what this type of mental

defense was. He was well versed in the Mind Arts and he had never encountered something like this. For a few seconds he tried everything he could but Harry's defenses were excellent. After a few moments trying to find a way around them, Dumbledore finally gave up.

"Are you quite finished, Headmaster?" asked Harry with a huge smirk in his face as he felt Dumbledore slipping out of his mind.

"Where did you learn Occlumency, Harry?" he asked seriously.

"Oh, here and there." Harry said.

Dumbledore continued with his interrogation. "Was it Black who taught you?"

"I don't see why that's any of your business."

Dumbledore did his best to bring up his grandfatherly façade. Harry could only groan inwardly. "It is because you have showed a great affinity for this rare art. Very few are capable of achieving this levels of control. I could help you improve it, if you want." said Dumbledore in his false sweet tone. Harry only snorted at this. "May I ask what are you laughing at? Did I say something funny?" Dumbledore said as if offended.

"I laugh at your antics and how can people can be so naïve and innocent to fall for them."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Really? Don't you? You offer me Occlumency classes, in which you will have full access to my mind. You'll get the memories you want and then, you'll probably dump me. Or you might also try to negotiate, the classes in exchange for the memory you want. But let me assure you, Professor, that none of it will work. You're one of the most successful wizards in this type of magic, only second to Voldemort if I'm not mistaken, and even then, you weren't able to break through my defenses. Actually, you were lucky I didn't try to throw you off. It would have been very unpleasant for you, Headmaster, I can assure you that. So tell me, why would I need your crappy classes?"

"You're not afraid to speak his name." Dumbledore observed, managing successfully a change of subject.

"Voldemort's? No. Why should I?"

"That's the same question I've been asking myself for many years now. How can we expect to defeat a Dark Lord when we do not dare utter his name?"

"Yet you place all hope and responsibility on someone who is afraid of speaking said name."

"Harry, before Voldemort rose to power, Wizarding Britain was living its Golden Age. I remember those days very well, they were happy days. Our population was at its highest as well as our economy. Hogwarts never had so many students enrolled as in those years. People enjoyed happy lives, lives without fear of being attacked at any moment. Thirty years of living without any real threat, without any powerful enough wizard to become a seriously threatening Dark Lord made wizards believe that it would never happen ever again, that the Ministry had taken steps to ensure that another Gellert Grindelwald would not arise. But, alas, after I brought him down, in its jubilation the Ministry did nothing to ensure such thing didn't happen again. They say that history is doomed to repeat itself if we don't learn from it, and we certainly didn't. When Voldemort did his first appearances, people thought it was another weak Dark Lord wannabe. There were many times we could have stopped him for good then, but we didn't."

"Why didn't you?"

"Many Dark Lord applicants appeared at the time. Most of them fought among themselves and ended up destroying each other. The Ministry only intervened in those who posed a real threat. I suppose that Voldemort didn't classify as such at the time and was ignored in hopes that he would appear dead somewhere. He was actually taken into custody a couple of times. He either vanished into thin air or manipulated, and threatened people, to avoid Azkaban. Gradually his attacks started to become bolder. His numbers grew and the entire wizarding world started to fear his name. By the time you and your brother were born the situation was desperate. Diagon Alley was totally deserted. Wizards rarely left the relative safety of their homes. But then, your brother defeated Voldemort. He became

the Wizarding World's hero. Now that Voldemort has returned, your brother has arisen as the beacon of hope. He defeated him once, and I'm absolutely positive that he'll do it again. He's fought Voldemort and his Death Eaters many times and lived to tell the tale after all."

"A tale that has holes the size of the Africa in it."

"For security reasons we cannot disclose all the information carelessly Harry. It could create a panic."

"Or ruin your side of the story. Many people are starting to think along the same lines I've been during the last few years. They are questioning if Karl really has the potential to get rid of him. Karl may have defeated Voldemort once, but I seriously doubt we should all venerate him and lick his ass for a thing he can't even remember doing or that you cannot even begin to explain. If you ask me, I think he got a lucky shot. Even the mildest cutting charm could sever an artery, and produce a rapid death. It's all it takes, a lucky shot. I'm sure that the war ended thanks to Voldemort's carelessness, not Karl's merits. He won't commit the same mistake twice. When he gets his hands on Karl, nothing will be able to stop him. Karl's a powerful wizard, true, and in some years time he could become one of the most powerful of his generation, but he'll continue to be a mere insect compared to Voldemort, just like you are. So what makes you think that he'll be able to defeat him again? What made you think you had the right to manipulate my parents into favoring him while neglecting me!" Harry finished vehemently.

"It was prophesized." Dumbledore said after a long pause.

"What?" Harry asked disbelievingly, thinking the Headmaster was trying to pull his leg.

"According to a Prophecy, that I will not disclose to you, your brother will be the one to kill Voldemort. We knew it would be one of you. We became certain when Voldemort was vanquished by Karl."

"You're telling me that you knew he would come after us and you failed to stop him?"

"I can assure you that the best protections were placed around Godric's Hollow."

"Well, they didn't do much good did they?" Harry said sarcastically.

"Voldemort found a way around them. Nobody out of the Order knows this, but Voldemort had a spy in our mist."

"Who?"

"I'm afraid I can't discuss that with you. I've already told you more than enough."

"Come on, we've come this far and you're not gonna tell me?"

"I'm sorry Harry but I can't."

"Can't, or won't? At least tell me what became of this spy!"

"He was discovered and he was killed."

"And I thought only Death Eaters knew how to kill." said Harry in a sarcastic and accusatory tone.

"One of my Order members killed him in self defense when he discovered where his true loyalties lay. It was not a premeditated death, but it was certainly for the better."

"Yeah, so it was for the greater picture, or greater good, or whatever you call it now."

"Yes."

"So you agree with those who would say that the ends justify the means."

"Yes, you could say that."

"Then why are you fighting Voldemort? He only wishes to form a society only formed by purebloods with whatever means necessary. Aren't you a bit of a hypocrite Professor?" argued Harry with a smirk. Dumbledore sighed patiently trying to come up with a plausible reply.



"There are means, and means, Harry. Voldemort's actions, his killings and attacks, they were deliberate, while ours are only used as a last resort."

"Yeah, manipulating my parents into neglecting me is certainly a last resort."

"I have never manipulated your-"

"Save it, Professor. If every time you lied I was given a Knut I would be the richest guy alive."

"Harry-" Dumbledore started again but was cut off by Harry.

"So... now you're basing all your war strategies in a damned prophecy you don't even know if it'll come true? What if Karl isn't able to fulfill it? What then? You'll just surrender?"

"I know that this upsets you Harry. But we had to ensure that he got all the training he could get."

"That doesn't explain why you had to ruin my life in the process." Harry hissed.

"I couldn't risk he turned dark. He had to grow up knowing the meaning of love and fearing the dark. Only like this he would be able to do what he must."

"Love? The only person he loves is himself!"

"I don't think that's true Harry."

"Why do you insist in calling me Harry?" he asked in an irate tone. "It may work in Karl's case to have a close grandfatherly like relationship, with all that love bullshit, but I don't want any kind of friendship or else with you that would give you the right to call me something other than Mr. Potter. I'm only a student, and the school rules clearly say which is the appropriate way for a Professor to address a student and vice versa."

Dumbledore sighed and decided to humor him. "All right, Mr. Potter."

"So did you want anything else, Headmaster?"

"I would like you to reconsider submitting your me-" was all Harry heard before he stood up and left, tired of his family's attempts to punish him and angry at Dumbledore. Angry at his parents. Angry at Karl. Angry at everything that had to do with them.

.o0o.

Later that evening, a few minutes before dinner, James managed to corner Dumbledore in the small room which the Hogwarts staff used to enter the Great Hall. Dumbledore had told him that he had called for Harry after his last class ended, and that he would surely have their precious piece of information before dinner.

"Albus!" he said in an urging tone, asking him to wait before he entered the Great Hall for dinner.

"Ah, James. I-"

"Do you have it?" James interrupted unable to contain his eagerness and curiosity.

"No. I'm afraid I don't James."

"You don't have it?" he said looking disappointed. "Dumbledore, we need that memory!" he urged.

"I know, but, surprisingly, your son showed a great affinity for Occlumency. He was able to keep me out of his mind using a rather unconventional method. Therefore I was unable to get it."

"When did he learn Occlumency? And who taught him?" inquired James with a shocked look.

"That's a mystery for us. I tried convincing Harry of submitting it voluntarily but he wouldn't listen."

"Then how are we going to get that restraining order? Our best piece of evidence is gone!"

"We still have Neville Longbottom."

"Neville Longbottom?" asked James, unsure of what the Headmaster was implying.

"He is your son's best friend. There's a chance that he was there with both of them."

"That's right. So you're going to try and enter his mind? It's risky Albus. If Harry knows Occlumency Longbottom might as well. If he detects your intrusion he could press charges."

"That's why I asked Augusta Longbottom for her permission right after Harry left my office. She readily agreed to. Now, Harry and Neville spend every morning by the lake getting some exercise. Early tomorrow Hufflepuff has Quidditch practice so my guess is Neville will be there alone. I'll confront him then."

.o0o.

Another Chapter up. Hope you enjoyed it. I really appreciate reviews, so let me know what you thought about it. ;)

## Chapter 10: Discovered?

After having checked the Hufflepuff common room, Harry finally found Neville in the Library. He was sure his friend would want to know how his conversation with Dumbledore had gone. He found him sitting in a table at one end of the library with Susan Bones and Hannah. Susan was sitting in between them, explaining some difficult subject, but Harry observed that Neville and Hannah were paying very little attention to her and stealing glances at each other when the other one wasn't looking. They blushed every time they caught each other. Hannah had probably brought Susan along because she was still a bit shy around Neville.

Harry decided to leave and confront Neville later, so he fished out of his bag his Charms textbook and sat alone at a table. He decided he should complete the assignment on the Shrinking charm first, which was due tomorrow. Perhaps, if he understood the theory behind the charm first, he would be able to perform it successfully.

Half an hour later, he had already written a three feet long essay explaining the charm. Its origins, its uses, the theory behind it... With a new found confidence, he rummaged through his bag searching for something in which to practice the charm. He finally settled for a spare piece of parchment. It was the simplest object he could come up with. Soon he encountered the same difficulties he had experienced a few days before in the class. His parchment would shrink partially, it would shrink too much and without control, or it wouldn't shrink at all. A sweet voice interrupted his work just when he was starting to get really frustrated.

"Need some help?" Startled, Harry turned sharply to face Riley Wilkinson carrying some books in her arms and looking at him somewhat amused.

"Er, hi. No I... yes, yes I do!" Harry admitted. When he calmed down a bit he added. "Shrinking Charm, I can't seem to get the hang of it."

"Oh yeah, I remember. The mysterious disappearance of the spoon." she teased him as she took a seat beside him.

"You don't believe that was what actually happened?"

"As your mother said, it's quite a difficult for that to happen."

"Well, you should know that my mother isn't always right. You and your Ravenclaw friends should stop worshipping her." Harry shot back annoyed.

"You don't get along do you?" she observed with a frown.

"Is it that obvious?" Harry asked mock worried tone. She laughed. Harry felt intoxicated by her laugh and determined to make her laugh more often.

"It must be difficult having both your parents as teachers." she commented.

"It's horrible. I liked them better as Aurors. Back home I could ignore and hide from them." She giggled, which made him smile in return. "Here, however, I have to attend their classes."

"Well, I'm sure there are some upsides." she argued.

"If you're able to name a single one, I will do your homework for a month." Harry declared.

Riley giggled again. "I'd certainly take you on that one. OWL year is really stressful! I wouldn't let you make my Charms homework though." she teased him making him smile.

"I'm not hopeless at it. I've certainly never had trouble with Charms before." Harry protested. "It shouldn't drop your marks too much if you won the bet."

"Well, if I don't get this essay done they will." she said taking out some papers.

After that they fell into a companionable silence as she worked on her essay and he tried the Charm until he got the hang of it. They furtively stole glances from each other, in the same Neville and Hannah did, and in the same way they blushed when they caught each other. A while after, Harry looked up from his partially shrunken quill as he saw Neville, Hannah and Susan getting up. It looked as if they were leaving. He was really enjoying Riley's company, even if it was in silence, but he really wanted to talk to Neville to and explain

everything about Dumbledore, the memory thing, his first successful defense against a Legilimency attack...

He made a quick gesture to his friend, which noticed him immediately. Neville smiled and wiggled his eyebrows when he saw Riley working beside his friend. Harry blushed and nodded in Hannah's direction returning the blush to Neville.

Neville saw Harry say his goodbyes to Riley and settled to do the same with Hannah. After a quick goodbye to both Hufflepuff girls, blush included when he addressed his favorite, he walked out of the Library with Harry. They went straight to the Room of Requirement, which they had discovered two years ago. A House elf from the kitchens had happily told them about it the day the Weasley twins told them where to find the kitchens.

When they arrived, Harry walked three times in front of the wall, willing the Room to become the living room of one of New York's most exclusive penthouses. The entire exterior wall of the room was made of glass. The views of the city were breathtaking. This is where they were planning to move in when they left the Wizarding World. Neville would receive his inheritance once he was of age and Harry should inherit something, even with his parents hating him. They both took a Butterbeer from the fridge and went to sit down in the couches beside the windows.

"So what did Dumbledore want?" asked Neville taking a seat in one of the modern and beige couches.

"I don't really know. First he went on about my friendship with Padfoot. My parents seem to think that he's a bad influence for me. Hell, he's the only one apart from you that influences me. Then there's the part that really unsettles me. He was rather fixed on getting the memory of yesterday from my mind. He used Legilimency on me!"

"But that would mean..."

"That one of my parents gave him permission." Harry cut rather forcefully.

"Do you think they're doing this just to punish you? That would be holding a grudge."

"I agree. It is just too weird. My father punishes me every chance he gets. I don't understand why he's so bent on punishing me for going to Hogsmeade. I mean, I'm sure he'll find something to punish me for in a few days time."

"And now that they have the memory what are you gonna do?" asked Neville feeling worried.

Harry smirked. "Who said they had it?"

"You said Dumbledore performed Legilimency on you. He's one of the best in that field. There's no possible way you could've resisted it."

Harry started laughing lightly.

"What?" asked Neville, somewhat amused and disconcerted. "You're gonna tell me you have some weird inborn power that enables you to protect your mind?"

"Yes!" said Harry still laughing. "We both have, Nev! Our Animagus forms! They can be used as a mind protection."

Neville narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What are you on about?"

"Sirius told me yesterday when I spoke to him over the mirror. Not many people know about it, but when you change mentally into your form, not even Dumbledore or Voldemort will be able to get in."

"Why I am being told about this now?" Neville asked his best mate, a little annoyed.

"Well I never got around telling you, and when I did, I just forgot."

Neville huffed annoyed. "Whatever... So you kept Dumbledore out of your mind with no trouble at all?"

"That's it. You should've seen his face when he came out. Priceless! Oh, and by the way, you know this tale that goes around the school that Dumbledore knows who's coming into his Office before they can even knock?"

"Yes..."

"It's a simple identification Rune in the floor. Quite small, but difficult to miss if you're actually looking for it."

"Why am I imagining that you took advantage of it?" Neville asked with a small smile.

"Again, you should have seen his face when he opened the door. He was really confused."

"So any more guesses about what they want that damned memory for?"

"Dunno. But I really think they're up to something. And that isn't good for any of us. I thought they would let the matter drop. It's not as if it's the first time someone has sneaked out of the castle and the Professors haven't been able to prove it. But with Dumbledore, it looked like the very point of our conversation was to get the memory out of me. They want it real bad. Anyway, whatever it is they want the memory for, I ain't gonna let them take it without a fight."

"So tell me more about this weird Animagus thing. They could also try and get it through me."

"I thought so too."

For a while Harry passed on his knowledge and after that they just relaxed, enjoying the pleasures of Muggle life and the views of the city at night from their comfortable couches.

On Monday morning Harry had his first Quidditch training session. They were playing Gryffindor the following Saturday and the team members wanted Harry to get some hours of practice before then. As he woke up and dressed himself in his Quidditch gear, he saw Neville getting ready for the first workout he would do all alone since they had implanted it. Harry looked at him and apologized silently with a shrug for not being able to join him, which Neville quickly dismissed.

They made their way silently to the Common room. Neville went ahead and left towards the grounds, while Harry stayed behind until all the players came down. He observed with an amused glance the



scowls his team mates shot at their Captain. Some of them cursed him under their breaths for scheduling the practice so early in the morning. It was obvious that they weren't used to be already up this early. Harry, on the other side, had become quite used to it.

Training went on as Harry had expected. First they flew a few laps around the pitch to warm up, Harry didn't really understand why. If they ran instead of flying he would have understood. But flying? What use was that for? After that needless warming up, the Keeper and the Chasers worked together, the Chasers practicing different strategies while the Keeper's job was to prevent the Quaffle getting through one of the three hoops he had behind. Meanwhile the Snitch was released and Harry had to catch it again and again. Harry had sworn to himself not to use his animagus abilities to spot it faster. It was an unfair tactic, but aside from that, it could easily point out that he was an animagus. The Beaters would fly around, randomly aiming the bludgers at Chasers, Seeker and Keeper alike. Every once in a while, Harry and the two Beaters would be called to defend the hoops against their chasers, so they could try out new tactics and improve their existing ones.

Some time before they ended, while Harry was busy looking for the Snitch, he spotted a blue figure heading to the castle. It was coming from the lake's direction, where Neville was presumably training. He quickly transformed mentally thus gaining the falcon's keen eyesight. Such was the improvement in his vision that he spotted the Snitch almost instantly without really meaning to. He turned to observe the person dressed in blue and found it was Professor Dumbledore. A sudden feeling of uneasiness settled in him and quickly turned to look in the direction of their training spot in the lake. Harry was relieved when he saw his friend by the lake's shore, but it rapidly turned into worry as he saw him transform back and forth between the animal and human forms. Had Dumbledore seen him transform? Had he questioned Neville about it? Had Dumbledore asked if Harry was one too? Dumbledore could easily know now that he was an Animagus too. Damn, they could get in so much trouble!

"Oi Potter!" cried a voice. "What the hell are you doing? Focus on the Snitch!"

Harry realized he had zoned off for some minutes while worrying about Neville and their forms being discovered. He hadn't caught any Snitches during these last few minutes and realized they might

call the reserve Seeker to fill in his position if he didn't do well in the training. He ignored all of his previous self-promises and used the falcon's properties to catch a couple of Snitches in record time to show the team he was still the best seeker. He hoped the training would be over soon so he could talk to Neville soon.

What he hadn't expected was the training to last until half an hour before breakfast. That gave him little time to get ready for classes, if you took into account that it took nearly a quarter of an hour to get from the Quidditch Pitch to their Common Room. Their Captain would delay the practice's end as much as he could. He was determined to do as well as they could, he knew that their odds at winning the Cup, having lost against Slytherin, were very low, almost non-existent.

Neville caught up with Harry later that morning during breakfast. After his solitary workout, he had gone down to the Great Hall bit early to finish his Potions essay so he had not seen Harry since they had woken up. Before breakfast was served, the Great Hall was usually quiet and deserted, except for a few Ravenclaws, so it turned out to be a fine place to study or finish your homework. When the rest of the students began to come down, the clatter became unbearable but thankfully Neville managed to finish his essay before then. The Ravenclaws that had kept him company looked ready to murder half the student's population for disrupting their study.

Neville began to fill his plate while scanning the crowd for his friend. After the first wave of students had trespassed the solid oak doors he still couldn't spot him, but then again he didn't see anyone of the Quidditch team yet. He had wanted to congratulate him for his performance during the practice. He had seen part of it from his spot at the lake and was not surprised by Harry's flying abilities. But above else, Neville wanted to discuss another matter that had been troubling him since he had been practicing his transformations that morning.

His thoughts were interrupted when Susan, Justin, Ernie and Hannah approached him. Susan and Ernie sat across him, while Justin took a place at his side. Neville blushed when Hannah took the place at his other side instead of sitting next to Justin. She smiled warmly at him with a slight blush of her own.

"What's up guys?" he managed to say after muttering a shy good morning to Hannah. "Don't you normally seat with the sixth years?"

"Yeah, but we don't feel like it." answered Susan with a tone that implied they weren't too comfortable sitting with them.

"I understand."

"It's not we don't like them anymore but, after what happened with Potter, I can't stand to be near people when they start to idolize him." Hannah explained.

There was a moment of tense silence that Justin broke when he saw Neville's essay lying at the center of the desk.

"Hey Neville can I borrow this for a sec?"

"Sure, but I advise not to copy anything from it. It's not that I mind if you do, but you all know how horrible I am at Potions."

"Don't worry mate! I just want to check a couple of things and I'll let you know if you've messed up somewhere."

Ernie started to argue with Susan about something in Neville's essay. Justin was dragged into the argument only a couple of seconds later, so that left Neville and Hannah sitting together. Neville was beyond nervous. He had the chance to speak 'alone' to the girl he had fancied for the last couple of years, but he was clueless about girls and was absolutely shy around them. He thought about what to say to her, how to engage a conversation, but his nerves kept him from thinking clearly. He was fortunate he didn't open his mouth and start speaking about the weather or something as boring and pathetic as that. They locked gazes a couple of times during these few seconds, which seemed more like hours. They both blushed furiously and looked away both times. If they hadn't been so nervous, they would have both noticed they were going through the same.

When Harry finally made it to the Great Hall, there were only a few minutes left until the classes started. He didn't see Neville at their normal spot, but he found him soon enough when he looked further down the table where their other Housemates were sitting. The wolf Animagus was sitting right next to Hannah and blushing furiously at

times. Harry smiled and walked down the aisle to where they were sitting. However, after a few steps he stopped right in his tracks. He stood there staring in the direction of the Ravenclaw table. His insides froze and pure rage made its appearance when he saw his 'dear' brother standing next to Riley and her friends and talking to her in a friendly manner. He managed to control himself but seeing Riley smile at his brother's jokes twisted his insides. He walked away and missed the smirk that his brother directed at him.

Neville was 'saved' of his predicament when Harry appeared all of a sudden at his side. He didn't look directly at him and grabbed a piece of toast. However he didn't take a sit and looked murderous.

"Hey Neville, Hannah. Can I have a word with you Nev?"

"Err... sure. I'll see you at Potions Hannah?"

"Yeah." she said with a smile.

"So what's this all about? You look troubled." Neville asked Harry as soon as they left the Great Hall.

"Wait 'til we're in the grounds."

"Look, if it's about sitting with the other Hufflepuffs..."

"It's got nothing to do with them. I don't mind them sitting with us. It's a nice feeling to know there are people other than us who hate Karl, who don't idolize him."

"Oh, ok. I've seen you practice this morning. You were great!"

"Really?" Harry said perking his head up.

"Of course, I picked a nearer spot to the Pitch to practice my... transformation. From there I could see you clearly." he said with a small voice. And Harry nodded absently. "What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid that we won't need this secrecy anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our Animagus abilities, I think Dumbledore found out about them!"

"What? How? Are you sure?"

"Yes. I spotted him from my broom. He was near the lake, going back to the castle. I think he might have seen you."

"Fuck!" Neville swore. "When I was transforming I picked up a scent. I started following but it disappeared all of a sudden. That might have been him."

"So what do we do now?"

"We could always check if it was actually him there."

"Neville, it was definitely him. I saw him using the falcon's eyesight. I saw him as clearly as I see you now."

"Then we have to discover if he has actually seen me transform."

"I'm sure he has. You said his trail disappeared all of a sudden. That can only mean that he knew you were following his scent."

"So what you asked earlier. What should we do now?" he asked worriedly.

## Chapter 11: Potions

James Potter walked rapidly through the halls that lead to the Great Hall. He was eager to know if, as he had assured him the night before, Dumbledore had got hold of that damned memory that his son was unwilling to give up freely. With luck, they would be able to file the request to the Ministry today and have the restraining order become official in the next couple of days. His anxiousness built up when he saw the Headmaster already at the staff table with that extremely annoying and ever-lasting twinkle in his eyes and looking quite pleased with himself.

He crossed the Great Hall and took his place at the Headmaster's right. When their gazes met, he raised his eyebrows inquiringly. The Headmaster ignored him. Having known the man for years, he knew they would talk about it later, in private. James noticed the Headmaster looking closely at his son Harry, and his friend Neville. The old man would normally behold the school's students during meals, but today he seemed particularly engrossed with those two, who also glanced occasionally, yet continually, towards them and whispering among themselves. A few moments ago, when Harry had arrived he had taken Neville out of the Great Hall but they had come back a few minutes later to finish their breakfast. To his surprise, the other Hufflepuff fifth years were sitting with them. He guessed it had something to do with that Hufflepuff girl Hannah Abbot. She had seemed quite taken with the Longbottom boy after they came back from Hogsmeade.

When the students began to leave the Hall to get to their morning classes Dumbledore stood up from the table and silently signaled for James to follow him. He led him to a small chamber just outside the Great Hall.

"Please, tell me you got it." James said eagerly as soon as he shut the door behind him.

"No, I haven't." the old headmaster admitted. When James was about to protest he raised his hand to silence him. "I have discovered, however, something very interesting."

"What is it?" James asked impatiently.

"It is the kind of thing that would enable us to get that piece of information from Harry's mind, instead of Neville's. In a court this difference could tip the balance to our side."

"What have you discovered then? What is it that will make us capable of surpassing Harry's mental shields?"

"Your son and Neville are Animagus, or in the process of becoming one."

"What?" James said flabbergasted.

"I saw Neville Longbottom practicing his transformation this morning by the lake."

"How do you know Harry is one then?"

"Come on James, you think that young Mr. Longbottom would become one and not tell his friend about it? Besides, what do you think they spend their time by the lake on?"

"That makes sense, although I thought they only went to get some exercise. I wasn't expecting him to be an Animagus." he said looking really surprised. "What was Longbottom's form? Do you think they're registered?"

"Something tells me they aren't. However, I could be mistaken. It has been too long since I checked the Animagus Ministry records for the last time."

"What about Longbottom's form?"

"He is a wolf, and one with a sharp nose at that. He started following my trail until I realized he was following my scent. He nearly caught up with me." Dumbledore explained recalling the close call with an amused look on his eyes.

"What about Harry? You really think he is one too?"

"I'm absolutely certain. How else then could he have managed to keep me out from his mind." the old wizard explained.

"What does the Animagus transformation have to do with Occlumency?"

"An Animagus transformation can help you protect your mind."

"How? In what way?" he asked genuinely interested. He had never known about this in all his years as an Animagus.

"When you transform mentally you create a powerful mind barrier that not even me, Voldemort or the most experienced Legilimens could ever dream to breach."

"Wow, I didn't know that one. So that's how Harry kept you out..." he commented quietly. "How come you didn't realize it when you were trying to get past Harry's barriers?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It is a very old and rare art. Very few Animagi know about it, given that the legal way to become an Animagus is through the Ministry, and I don't think that mind arts, which are seen as dark magic by some, are something that a light-sided government would teach its citizens."

"And the people becoming one illegally are not likely to go looking for this type of information or else they could be discovered." James added thoughtfully.

"Once your son left my office, I immediately started to research rare types of Occlumency. I had a few ideas about how he could have kept me out. When I saw Mr. Longbottom transform this morning it became all clear: Harry must be one too. It runs in the family after all..." James' face went blank. "Tell me James, is your son an Animagus too? Or in the way to become one?" Dumbledore inquired further.

"How do you know?" asked James a bit surprised.

"Come on James. I know you are a fine stag yourself." declared Dumbledore surprising further his former student. "I've known since your sixth year, and the reasons behind that decision."

"Well, they seemed good reasons to us at the time. Now I'm not entirely sure we should have done it." James said looking a little bit gloom.



"Karl has been trying to learn Occlumency for some time now, and with very little success I must say. Animagus transformations and Occlumency aren't compatible magics. So I'm assuming Karl is indeed an Animagus."

"Yes he is." James said with a bright smile. He had been most proud when Karl had shown the interest in becoming one. "He didn't want you to know though. He wanted to impress you."

Dumbledore laughed kindly. "I am impressed that he even managed to become one. It is no easy feat I've been told. Don't worry, I'll keep the secret and act surprised when he shows me."

"Thank you Albus. He's most anxious to complete it so he can show it to you." James replied with gratitude.

"Do you mind if I ask what form does he have?" Dumbledore said.

"What form would have the bravest Gryffindor since the founder himself?" James said proudly. "A lion."

"A fine animal." Dumbledore agreed. "It does apply well to him."

"That's what I told him."

"Back to Harry then. The only way to get that memory is to attack Harry's mind when he isn't transformed mentally. He can be in that state for many days or weeks, and even when he's sleeping we wouldn't be able to get in. However there is a way that will ensure that we get into his mind. But for that I'll need Karl's help, and your consent of course."

"Karl?" James asked a tad confused.

"Yes. Go and fetch him and bring him to my Office, where I'll explain what we shall do."

"But right now he has classes to attend, Albus." James said.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be delighted to skip Potions." Dumbledore offered making James smile.

"Okay. I'll go and fetch him. Meet you at your Office in ten?"

"Sure." Dumbledore said with a smile as he walked away.

.o0o.

Potions period turned out to be a surprisingly interesting and relaxed class that day. For starters, Karl was dragged out of the class by his father a few minutes after the bell rang, so the class was fairly quiet. Snape had had an interesting and heated argument with both Potters when James came by to collect his son. Then he proceeded to be even more unbearable than usual, if that was even possible. Luckily he didn't pick on Harry or Neville, because they didn't ruin their potion or blew up their cauldrons. This was because they had decided to split up, due to Justin's and Hannah's advice. While Ernie and Susan paired up together, Harry ended up with Justin while Neville was paired with Hannah. Harry observed with a bit of amusement as Neville stammered and blushed repeatedly each time they spoke. However after a few minutes, the tension between them started to disappear and they started to feel comfortable around each other. They engaged in small conversations.

It was then when Harry turned his attention to his current partner. They worked in silence, only conversing about the potion they were attempting to brew. Harry felt a little bit awkward around him. He was used to talk openly with Neville and Sirius, but he didn't know what to say to Justin. He barely knew him. However, after a few minutes he remembered that Justin had also gone for his Seeker position at the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Now, he had something to talk about, but he was still at a loss about what to say. It was kind of rude to start a conversation by saying something like: 'So... We both tried out for Seeker and I was the one who got the position.' Luckily he was saved from opening the conversation when Justin brought the very same topic he was thinking about.

"So tell me Harry, how was the Quidditch practice?" he asked him without looking up from the mandrake roots he was carefully chopping according to the instructions on the board.

"It was very good actually." Harry answered feeling relieved. "The team seems to be in very good form."

"Aye, it is. We weren't faring so bad against Slytherin, which is undoubtedly the best team, when Malfoy caught the Snitch. It was a stroke of luck if you ask me. The only thing that was wrong with our team was the Seeker. I wanted to solve that problem personally when Summerby was suspended." he said in a neutral tone. Harry fidgeted uncomfortably. "Don't worry. I don't hate you because you got the position. You got more Snitches than I did and flying a poorer broom. You won fair and square and I accept that."

"Okay, thanks. I appreciate that, really. Truth is I've been wondering if you were ever going to bring this up now that we're..."

"Friends?" Justin said looking up.

"I thought more of companions. Don't get me wrong, but we don't know each other too well." He said sounding a bit apologetically.

"I understand. We've barely talked to each other in all this years, and my behavior towards you left much to be desired." he said a bit ashamed.

"Don't worry about that. We already talked about it. You apologized and I accepted your apologies. There's nothing more to it." he assured him.

"Well, it seems that both our groups will spend enough time together from now on, so I think we'll get past that companions barrier soon enough." Justin said while nodding at Neville and Hannah.

Harry turned towards Neville and Hannah and saw that they had gotten even more comfortable with each other's presence. All the previous blushes were now gone, and the tension and nervousness had been replaced by laughter and smiles.

"So you've noticed that too." Harry said turning back to him.

"Yeah, it's hard not to." Justin replied with a slight sad expression that Harry didn't fail to notice. "They both blush furiously when they speak to each other."

"And they're not the only ones though." Harry said talking about Ernie and Susan, who looked even cozier than Hannah and Neville.

"It has been public knowledge to everyone except them. Now, Neville and Hannah was indeed a big surprise. I certainly didn't see it coming."

"Neville's been crazy about her for the last couple of years actually. He didn't have the guts to approach her because we've always been the social nobodies of the school, and Neville's always been very shy."

"I think Hannah started to notice him at the start of this year. It's easy to notice that you both lost some weight over the summer and you've been gaining muscular mass since then."

"Then why did she go out with my brother?"

"I don't know. I suppose it was the opportunity of going out with the 'great' Karl Potter. From what I've been told all the girls our age that were brought up in the magical world grew up knowing about your brother and having fantasies about him."

"I'm glad that he tried to kill him first instead of me. If it had been me who had vanquished him, I'd be as much of a jerk as he is."

"You could never know."

"Can I ask you something?" said Harry cautiously. "Do you have a thing for Hannah?"

Justin looked up from the potion. "I had. Maybe I still have. At the end of last year I told her how I felt, but she didn't feel the same way. She told me I was her best friend and that she didn't want to ruin it."

"Ouch." said Harry sympathetically.

"Yes, that would sum it up. What about you?" Harry blushed.

"Last year I had a slight crush on Cho Chang, but she was busy with Diggory." he said omitting Riley. He didn't know him too well as he had said.

"Looks luck's not on our side." Justin said defeatedly.

"Time's up." boomed Professor's Snape voice through the classroom. "Fill your vials with the potion and pass them forward."

Harry picked up two vials and poured some of the potion inside them. He named them Harry Potter and Justin Finch-Fletchey and passed them forward while his partner cleaned up.

"Well, it seems we might have a new record here. Neither Potter nor Longbottom has managed to ruin their Potions." Snape told them with a malicious sneer as he held two separate vials in his hands. "You might not be as dreadful as that idiotic brother of yours Potter. Perhaps there's still hope for you." said Snape. Harry smiled slightly at the insult, that coming from Snape, was more of a compliment.

.o0o.

The following class was transfiguration much to the fifth year Hufflepuffs disappointment. This time Harry and Neville sat together again as Susan had dragged her friend to a table before Neville had the chance to say anything. Without doubt, Susan would spend the period questioning her best friend about Neville. Harry noticed his father and brother taking a few glances at him, and then smirking between them throughout the class. Karl was not as subtle as their father, but Harry could tell they were up to something. And if his instincts weren't wrong he would bet it had something to do with their suspicions of their Animagus ability being discovered.

While their new friends started scribbling down notes furiously, trying to keep up with Professor Potter's lecture, Harry and Neville sat down and used that time to write the Potions essay Snape had assigned. From a distance, it looked as if they were taking notes and Harry's father didn't bother them, quite pleased his more problematic son was paying attention and behaving.

However, a few minutes before the bell rang, his father did something that threw him off. James Potter put Neville in detention for no reason. The episode reminded him of their first potion class ever, where Snape had bombarded his brother with impossible questions that no first year would be able to answer. His father had suddenly asked a couple of questions of which Neville obviously didn't know the answer. Then he had taken twenty points from Hufflepuff and told Neville to serve detention with Snape that evening after dinner.

It was obvious to everyone that it was a premeditated act although not everyone knew why. Only Harry, Neville and Hannah had a theory: Neville was being punished for hexing Weasley and Karl at the Quidditch stands. Harry didn't like the timing of it and thought there might be something more to it. He was wondering if those smirks at the start of the class were related to this.

The rest of the day was spent in a foul mood. After Divination, Harry, Neville and Ernie met up with Hannah and Justin, who had wisely chosen Ancient Runes over Divination. Harry and Neville had decided beforehand to eat their dinner at the kitchens and avoid the Great Hall and some of its most hated inhabitants. Albeit reluctantly, Harry gave in to Neville and allowed him to tell the rest of their house mates where the kitchens could be found. A horde of over-excited and eager to work house elves greeted them enthusiastically.

At length, after enjoying a customized meal where each group got to know each other a little better, Neville left Harry and the other Hufflepuffs in the kitchens and headed towards the dungeons where he would be serving detention with Snape. Justin asked Harry if he wanted to join them at the library and Harry quickly agreed. He was slowly warming up to his house mates and enjoyed spending time with them. Besides, he had to work on his Care of Magical Creatures essay, and Susan Bones was the top student in that subject. While the others went ahead, he took a detour and headed to his dormitory to fetch his mirror. Neville had his in his robes. Harry had expressed his uneasiness by the timing of the events of the last few hours, so they agreed to use them in Neville's detention, just in case.

Halfway to the library his recently retrieved mirror warmed up and started to vibrate slightly in his bag. He rummaged through its contents and pulled it out. Once he spoke the activation password Neville's face appeared in it.

"Hey mate!" Harry said.

"Hi. Snape's just went to mark some papers in his office."

"Be careful with the mirror. Make sure he doesn't see you."

"Don't worry. I'll hear the door of his office opening if he's coming. I'll have plenty of time to hide it before he opens the classroom's door."

"Good. So how are things with Hannah?" he asked casually making Neville blush dangerously.

"Err, good I suppose."

"I'm glad you finally caught her attention. So you gonna ask her out anytime soon?"

"I was planning on it."

"There's a Hogsmeade trip in two weeks time. Get to know each other a little better 'til then. After that, you ask her out."

"Yes, that was my- what was that?" Neville said when he heard a noise in the background.

Harry had heard it too. "Did that come from my end or yours?" he asked Neville, alarmed and looking over his shoulder.

"I think it was yours mate. It's all quiet around here."

"Well I don't see anyone around here." said Harry looking again at the mirror.

"Harry look out!" Neville cried when he saw Karl Potter appearing out of thin air behind his brother with his wand drawn.

Harry turned on his heel drawing his wand but he was too slow. A red light was already coming his way. The smirk on his brother's face was the last thing he saw before he lost consciousness.

.o0o.

There you go, another cahpter up. Please Read and Review. Hope you liked it guys. And hope you didn't mind the cliffie.

## Chapter 12: Backup

Neville watched in shock how Harry was stunned easily from behind by his brother. Attacking him while he's wandless! So much for Gryffindor bravery and chivalry! thought Neville. He helplessly watched Karl's shoe impact in the mirror and then the connection was broken. Neville cursed loudly and didn't notice the Potions Master coming in. Neville's cries had distracted him from his essays.

"What's the meaning of this Longbottom!" he hissed while picking up the empty mirror. "Who were you talking to?" Neville remained shocked for a few seconds and didn't say a word. Then he made a decision.

"It was Harry! He's just been attacked by his brother!" he told Snape. The Potions Master's face switched from anger to determination. He didn't particularly like Harry, like he didn't particularly like any other student, but Karl Potter was an entirely different matter. Snape hated Karl Potter with a passion. If Harry had been attacked by one of his Slytherins he wouldn't lift a finger to help him, but this was Karl Potter, James Potter's foolish Gryffindor brat they were talking about.

"Follow me Longbottom." he said leaving the Potions lab with his dark robes billowing behind. "Where was he attacked?"

"First floor!" Neville said rapidly as he followed him down the corridor. "He was heading to the library!"

Snape led him through a large number of secret passageways which Neville already knew about thanks to Harry's Map. He had to resort to some short runs to keep up with the Slytherin Head of House, who was walking at a faster pace than him due to his larger stride.

A few minutes later they arrived at the site where the attack had presumably taken place. Presumably, because there was no sign or evidence of such attack. Neville looked around frantically, looking for any indication, fearing that Snape would punish him further for making him lose his time.

"Is this it, Longbottom?" asked Snape looking around.



"Yes Sir. This is it. I swear it was here. I know it is because of that painting over there, the one with the Mimbulus Mimbletonia." said Neville anxiously.

"Your friend was also carrying one of those two-way mirrors, was he not?"

"Yes Sir. That was how I saw the attack take place." he answered in a firm tone. He thought Snape was starting to doubt the attack had ever happened at all.

Snape didn't answer and he merely raised his hand for fifth year to see and then pointed downwards with his index finger. Neville looked down and spotted a few glass shards that undoubtedly had once been part of Harry's mirror. Unfortunately the mirror was nowhere to be seen. He looked upwards and he saw Snape signaling him to shut up with the same finger with which he had pointed out the shards.

Neville remained silent and listened, as the Professor was doing. Their own breaths and his accelerated pulse was the only thing that he could hear. Nevertheless, Snape seemed to be hearing something. Neville wondered if Snape was an Animagus himself and used his form's abilities to enhance his hearing. Of course! His wolf form! He could enhance his hearing too thanks to the wolf. He did not waste time and not a second later, dozens of scents and noises he hadn't been able to pick up a moment ago flooded his senses.

Some seconds of absolute concentration later, Neville recognized the same scent that he had followed that morning. He turned to Snape and tentatively, he pointed down the corridor. Snape nodded in agreement and regarded his student with a mix of suspicion and approval. Neville's instincts were proven right when among the plentiful conversations, footsteps, books and doors opening and closing that Neville's hearing could pick up, even if they originated from the other side of the castle, he distinguished Karl's voice in a classroom in the corridor they were currently in. Professor Potter's voice was also heard and the fact that he wasn't hearing Harry's voice worried Neville. He knew he was there as he could smell four different human beings behind that door. One was surely Harry and the other one; he feared it might be Dumbledore, as it was undoubtedly the same mysterious scent from that morning. Another

nod from Snape confirmed him that the Potions Master had also picked up the conversation.

"Step aside, Longbottom." he said while checking the door for spells with his wand. "What a poor warding job!" he hissed to himself.

He took two steps backwards and pointed his wand to the keyhole. The Alohomora charm made it glow and the door clicked open. The conversation between the two Potters was still going on. They had not noticed them.

Snape pushed the half-closed door open in a rather violent manner and barged in interrupting the two arrogant prats' conversation. Instantly James was on Snape's face. The potions master rivaled James' murderous look with a deep trademark scowl, and soon after that their wands were out. They exchanged insults, threats, taunts and unpleasantries while Karl remained in the background, occasionally backing up his father.

Neville didn't discern their heated words because as soon as he caught a glimpse of the room after Snape ran in, his blood ran cold. Near the door the adults were having their umpteenth argument, but at the other side of the room he saw Harry lying on a table, a few empty potion vials beside him, and Dumbledore leaning over him with his eyes closed. He was oblivious to what was happening around him and his hands were on Harry's temples.

In that precise moment, Neville did something that shocked all the occupants of the room, including himself. He had not changed back into his human mind form after having located his missing friend, and as a consequence, the wolf's rage and instincts flared when Neville saw his friend's mind being raped and with the obvious consent of his own father. He growled ferociously and ran towards the Headmaster. The room succumbed to absolute silence when Neville tackled Dumbledore, throwing them both to the ground thus breaking the link with Harry's mind.

Harry regained consciousness that instant with a head splitting headache. He cried loudly and clutched his head with his hands while Dumbledore remained on the floor, barely conscious. It was then when Neville realized what he had done. If anyone asked Neville, he would say it was the wolf that made him attack the

Headmaster, but deep down, he knew that even without the wolf; he would have acted the same way without a second's thought.

"What have you done you fool!" cried James, grabbing Neville and pushing him out of his way to help Dumbledore up.

"I knew you could stoop low Potter, very low in fact. But this is beyond imagination! Letting people meddle in your son's mind without control! What's this?" said Snape while tending to Harry and picking one of the empty vials. "Veritaserum?"

"Shut up Snivellus!" James yelled angrily, knocking the vial out of Snape's hand. "This has nothing to do with you!"

"Yes it has Potter! It has since the moment you decided to get the Longbottom boy away from your path using me to keep an eye on him! Longbottom, get your housemate to the Infirmary. Tell Madam Pomfrey that his mind has been intruded violently and a dose of Veritaserum might be inside his body."

"You're going to let him walk after what he's done? He attacked the Headmaster! He should be expelled at the very least!" James said heatedly. Snape paused and then looked at Neville.

"Very well. Longbottom, you are to serve daily detentions with me until summer. Your Hogsmeade privileges are hereby revoked until further notice, your curfew is shortened by two hours and three hundred points will be taken from your house! Get him to Madam Pomfrey."

"That's not enough!" yelled James, making Neville stop once more.

"Longbottom, I will not repeat myself! Leave!" Snape barked. "Any punishment worse than this should involve suspension or expulsion Potter. Only the Headmaster of the school, along with the Board of Governors' approbation, has the authority to enforce such disciplinary measure."

"Well, you wait until he wakes up. We'll see what he has to say then!"

"We'll see what the Board of Governors has to say about the both of you scheming to rape your own son's mind." Snape countered.

James fell silent. "That'd be quite a curriculum. Suspended from the DMLE and sacked from Hogwarts." Then he left with a sneer on his face.

"Wait!" James cried after him. "Aren't you going to help me get him to the Infirmary?"

"No. Since he's so high up in your priorities I'll let you to deal with him while I go check on your son. He took the worse part, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Go fuck yourself Snivellus!" James cried after him.

.o0o.

Neville helped Harry walk to the Hospital Wing, but halfway through, Harry's walking became more and more erratic. He was barely conscious and nearly tripped over a couple of times, so Neville helped him lay on the floor and then he levitated him. When they arrived at the Hospital Wing, Neville placed him on an empty bed while calling for Madam Pomfrey with a desperate tone.

"What happened this time?" asked Madam Pomfrey appearing beside them.

"His mind has been intruded violently and he was fed forcefully a dose of Veritaserum." Madam Pomfrey's face turned into a serious and determined one when she heard it. She started working on him at once. She sedated him first and then started with basic mind diagnosis spells. After some seconds, the matron frowned and Neville realized that she was repeating some spells over and over again. It looked like as if she was confused.

"What's wrong?" asked Neville.

"There is something else here... People do not react like this to a mind intrusion! He is showing other symptoms, not the usual symptoms related with a mind rape."

"The mind link, it was cut short when I tackled... the guy doing it." Neville told her avoiding Dumbledore's name. He didn't need her berating her right now.

"Who was it Longbottom? Who was doing this to him?"

"I'd rather not say." He replied. The nurse looked pointedly at him. "Okay. It was the Headmaster."

"Dumbledore? Dumbledore was doing this?" she asked horrified.

"Yes." he replied.

"What in Merlin's name was he thinking! He should know better! And what possessed you to do interrupt a process like that? Are you not aware that people can go nuts or even die if you do so?" she reprimanded harshly.

"What?" Neville whispered, his face losing all of its color. "Is he gonna be okay?" he asked hysterically.

"I don't know Longbottom! Let me do my job." shot back Madam Pomfrey.

"Help him! Madam Pomfrey! Please!" said Neville, totally nervous. He could have killed his best friend without really intending to.

"Longbottom get away from here! I can't have you here in this state. If you want to help go fetch Professor Sprout and bring her here. When I'm finished you'll be able to come back in!"

That moment Harry started convulsing heavily. Neville had already started to walk towards the door when it happened and he just stood rooted to the ground, staring at him. Panic of losing his only friend overwhelmed him. Almost instantly the school nurse was waving her wand over Harry.

"Longbottom I told you to leave!" yelled the nurse in a commanding tone without even looking up from her patient.

Neville snapped out of it and started to walk backwards, eyes fixed on his friend. Another urging cry of the matron later, he broke into a full sprint towards the green houses, where his Head of House, and occasional assistant of Madam Pomfrey, was bound to be. In his way down he crossed Snape, and a few moments later, Professor Potter and Dumbledore. The Headmaster looked as if he had recovered as he was walking unassisted but rather slowly and with

guarded steps. They were surely heading to the Hospital wing to have him checked out. Neville ignored Snape's and Potter's questions and remarks when their paths met. The huge amount of adrenalin in his body allowed him to get to the green houses in record time without even losing his breath.

When he and Professor Sprout arrived to the Hospital Wing, the teachers didn't allow Neville to go back in. The brief moment the doors were opened to allow Professor Sprout in, Neville saw Snape helping Madam Pomfrey with Harry while Dumbledore lay on a nearby bed waiting to be attended. He was watching with a worried look how Harry was faring. Even though he had ignored the boy for most of his life and thought rather lowly of him, he was one of his students and he was in this situation partly because of him, not to mention that he could very well lose his job for this, despite having James' permission. Harry's father was standing next to Dumbledore, and was also looking worried. Neville wondered if he really cared about him. He had always favored Karl over him, ever since that fateful night. Maybe he only cared about him because he was his first born, heir to the Potter line. That would mean that he cared as much about him as Lucius Malfoy cared about his son, which quite frankly wasn't much.

Neville transfigured a nearby suit of armor into a comfortable couch, and sat just outside the door waiting for any developments. Seconds became minutes, and minutes became hours. For nearly two and a half hours he sat on the armchair, paced around nervously, tried meditating and even knocked a couple of times to see if he could come in. The first time he did, Snape opened it and told him that he couldn't come in. Neville saw a new occupant in the room when he looked over the potion's master shoulder trying to see how Harry was. It was a middle aged witch, in her early forties. Neville didn't miss the St. Mungo's emblem sewn on her white robes. He knew that emblem all too well. The day after Karl defeated Voldemort, his parents had been tortured into insanity by the Lestranges. Every year he would visit them in several occasions with her gran, and since a couple of years ago, Harry. He seriously hoped they weren't transporting him there. Only in the worst of cases Madam Pomfrey would transfer one of her patients to St. Mungo's.

.o0o.

After the four Hufflepuffs had waited a long time for Harry to show up, they had thought that he wasn't going to come. He had never been very sociable before, especially with his brother around, so they thought that he had changed his mind. They thought it was strange, especially after he had assured them that he would be joining them, but they didn't worry about it and continued with their studies.

Two hours later, they had already left the library with the majority of their assignments completed and now Justin and Hannah were hanging out in the Hufflepuff armchairs while Ernie and Susan had disappeared somewhere. Justin and her had a pool about how much time it would take before they got 'officially' together.

Supposedly Neville had finished his detention an hour ago, and as Harry, he too had agreed to meet the four Hufflepuffs, but neither one of them had returned from wherever they were yet. Hannah was the most anxious to see them, Justin noticed it with a sad smile but decided not to make any comment about it.

Some minutes before curfew they decided they should go and look for them. Justin would check Professor's Snape office while Hannah would go and see their Head of House. It was decided that they would meet at their common room at curfew time.

Hannah headed to the first floor, where Professor's Sprout was located. After a few unanswered knocks she opened the door and found the office deserted, so she proceeded to check the second most likely place to find Sprout, the green houses. She wasn't there either. From there she decided to check the Quidditch Pitch. She knew Harry had made it into the team and perhaps they were practicing a little bit. She started making her way there when she spotted the Weasley twins. Maybe they knew where Harry was.

"Hey, Weasleys?" she yelled at them. They both turned immediately as if their moves were synchronized with each other's.

"Yes? Abbott right?" asked one of them as she approached them.

"Yeah, that's right." she replied.

"So what can we..."

"...do for you?" asked the twins.

"I'm looking for Harry and Neville. I wondered if you have seen them lately."

"No we haven't since dinnertime." Fred told her.

"Anything wrong?" added George.

"Well, they were supposed to meet us. Harry after dinner and Neville after detention with Snape, but they haven't showed up." The twins exchanged a glance, as if asking each other something and then nodded. Hannah wondered what that was about.

"Okay Abbott. Come with us." said Fred, guiding her back to the green house she had just checked.

"We're gonna help you, but you'll have to promise that you won't say anything about what you're about to see." George explained closing the door behind him, allowing them some privacy.

Fred took out a blank piece of parchment of his pocket and Hannah looked at it and the redhead with a questioning glance.

"Karl Potter is the biggest prat ever." said George placing his wand on Fred's piece of parchment. Hannah stayed there, surprised for a few seconds before saying something.

"I know that but-" she stopped when she saw a Map of Hogwarts was appearing in the previously blank piece of parchment.

"That was only the password to activate it. Courtesy of one Harry Potter." explained Fred with a grin.

"Now, this Map shows every person within the castle, and unless Harry and Neville have moved out, which is highly improbable but recommended, given the excessive amount of gits that live here, we will find them." George explained to her.

"Let's see. Locate Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom."

The ink in the Map rearranged himself to show both names. Neville seemed to be outside a big room while Harry was inside, with Snape,



James Potter and Headmaster Dumbledore around him. Hannah didn't recognize the room but when Madam Pomfrey appeared at the edge of the Map, she realised that the room that was shown was indeed the Hospital Wing. None of them needed to be told that Harry wouldn't like to be around any of those people in his own. Fred pocketed the Map and the three of them ran to the Hospital Wing.

They arrived there and saw Neville pacing impatiently in front of the door.

.oOo.

When Dumbledore and James entered the Hospital Wing they found Harry lying in a bed, seemingly sleeping and with Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Sprout working on him. Snape was at one side talking to someone from St. Mungo's. James sat Dumbledore in one of the beds and remained at his side but following his son's progress. After a while, when they finally finished working on Harry and the Healer from St. Mungo's was gone, Madam Pomfrey came to tend to the Headmaster.

"Albus, I am most disappointed in you! You should know better than to play with people's minds."

"What has been done, had to be done Poppy." he told her in his soft and convincing tone.

"What's wrong with my son?" asked James.

"His mind was severely damaged when the mind link was interrupted. We've had a tough time healing it. More than it is normal."

"Why is that?" asked Dumbledore.

"I don't know for sure, but I felt as if there was Dark Magic influencing the healing."

"Dark magic? Are you sure?" asked James bewildered.

"There is only one way we can make sure. I'll check his Aura and see if there's any darkness in it." Dumbledore said at once.

"Potter? Going dark? There's no way that is possible. His obvious weakness and lack of power wouldn't let him perform even the simplest dark spell." said Snape, sneering at everyone. Not surprisingly, James did not defend his son. Had this been about Karl, probably he would already be duelling Snape.

"Besides, you would have surely noticed by now if the boy was going dark, wouldn't you Albus?" Sprout said, coming in defence of her student.

"Not necessarily. You see Pomona, Aura reading is an extremely slow activity to do. I only use this gift on seldom occasions as I often need some minutes to do it. Now you'll understand why I don't check everyone's Aura daily." he said with a kind smile. "But as I suspect that Poppy here will want to retain me here for some time, I am willing to check Harry's Aura now."

Dumbledore rose from his bed and staggered a little bit when he was standing on his feet. He approached the sleeping Hufflepuff and started to wave his wand over him. For some minutes nothing happened, but Dumbledore's wand waving did not stop. He began sweating profusely, but even then, he did not stop.

The occupants of the room observed the old man work, ready to help him at any time, as this was a trying activity and he had just suffered a broken Occlumency link. After a while, Dumbledore pocketed his wand and his face started to switch between different expressions. Surprise, fear and preoccupation. When his knees started buckling under him Snape and Pomona Sprout got him and carried him back to the bed. They didn't know what to be more afraid of, the Headmaster's health or his evident worry in his face.

"Are you feeling all right Albus?" asked the matron. Her first concern was her patient's health.

"Yes, yes. I'm only feeling a bit tired." he said, his eyes not meeting anyone's as he was deep in thought.

"What did you see?" urged James.

"James, I fear that your son has indeed gone Dark, James. Very dark I must say." James paled while Madam Pomfrey and Pomona Sprout gasped and Snape stood there surprised. "He has darkness

as I've never seen before in a boy his age. Not even Grindelwald had his Aura so shadowed."

"What do you mean?" asked Snape.

"I fear that Harry's Aura could even match Voldemort's."

.o0o.

There you go! Another chapter done. Hope you didn't mind much the small cliffie.

Any thoughts about what could be causing Harry's Aura to be so dark? :)

## Chapter 13: Outcome

Previously on 'To Know Your Enemy':

"What do you mean?" asked Snape.

"I fear that Harry's Aura could even match Voldemort's."

.oOo.

An intense silence followed those words. For a while nobody spoke and several seconds after the shocking statement the door creaked open interrupting everybody's musings. They all turned to see Neville, Hannah and the Weasley twins standing there and looking directly at Harry with worry on their faces. Neville shifted his gaze to Madam Pomfrey and she nodded, confirming that they could come in.

They all rushed to Harry. Madam Pomfrey explained them what was wrong with him, omitting the Dark Magic details and Dumbledore's involvement. Harry, Madam Pomfrey explained to them, was in a coma due to the stress that his mind had gone through when the mind had been so violently broken. He had been lucky though, and he was out of danger. The nurse told them he should wake up in a few days.

The other occupants of the room decided to retire to Dumbledore's quarters and discuss the distressing news. Snape who wasn't convinced about Harry's darkness and thought it was yet another act or scheme from Dumbledore decided he'd rather excuse himself and leave towards the dungeons where he had several potions to brew, or so he said. Sprout was nicely asked by Dumbledore to give them some space so he and the Potters could discuss this privately. Madam Pomfrey wasn't happy with Dumbledore leaving the Infirmary on his state but she was quickly overruled by him.

"I can't believe he's leaving." Hannah said looking at James Potter's retreating back. "It's his son who's at the Hospital Wing!"

"Arsehole." Fred said.

"So what happened?" George asked. They had entered as soon as they had arrived and seen Neville waiting outside the doors. He

hadn't had the chance to explain yet. "What was Poppy saying about mind links?"

"That bastard got into his mind." he told them. "Dumbledore." he added at their questioning faces. "He had Karl stun him in the back. Then, with both Potter's help they dragged him to an unused classroom and Dumbledore raped his mind!" Neville said heatedly and exasperatedly. Hannah squeezed his shoulder in support. Neville continued then. "I was down at the dungeons. Snape was in his office so I took out a pair of mirrors we have to communicate with each other. It was then when I saw that son-of-a-bitch behind him. I tried to warn Harry but I was too late. The connection between the mirrors broke. I suppose Harry's smashed when he dropped to the floor. Snape came in after that. He had heard me yell at the mirror. I told him Karl Potter had attacked his brother and he resolved to help me. When we found them I saw they had placed Harry on a table. Dumbledore was leaning over him. Something inside me snapped. I did what first came to my mind. I tackled him and we went both crashing to the door."

"Good job mate." Fred said appreciatively. His brother and he were amazed that he had attacked Dumbledore like that. Neville looked at them very seriously.

"No it wasn't. Harry's in this state because I broke forcefully the link between his' and Dumbledore's minds. Poppy said he could have been killed."

.o0o.

"What's going on?" Lily asked her husband while taking a seat at his side. She hadn't missed his grim look when he had fire-called her and told her to join them at the Head Office.

"Please, do take a seat Lily." said Dumbledore signalling the empty chair. "We have called for you to discuss an issue that needs our outmost attention. Its urgency is such that we could not overlook or postpone this in any possible way."

"What is it Albus?" asked Lily.

"We fear that your son, Harry," he clarified after seeing she had paled dramatically. After that she regained a bit of her colour. "has gone Dark."

"What makes you think that?" she managed to say after opening and closing her mouth several times without any words escaping her lips.

"I personally checked his Aura some minutes ago." he said, and after a pause that gave an incredible dramatic effect, he added in a worried tone. "Lily, your son has the Darkest Aura I've ever seen."

"No." she said in denial mode. "Harry might be somewhat rebellious and difficult, but he would never..."

"Lily? Can't you remember what happened when Harry was three and we found him talking to a snake?" he added.

"We were never sure that he was actually talking to it." Lily argued. "All we saw was-"

"Was Harry stroking a very dangerous snake that was coiled in his biceps. He had even named the damned thing!"

"But Harry has never shown any interests in any Dark spells." Lily said. She couldn't believe Harry would have gone dark.

"Lily, do you really think he would do it publicly, for us to know. No way. He's been practicing in secret." said James.

"Nevertheless, I think there is still time for him to go back to the right path. There is still time for him to redeem himself."

"How?"

"With love, my dear Lily. Love is power in its purest form. If he feels loved by his family he may not feel the need to continue such despicable practices. I fear that having lived under Karl's shadow has built an incredible amount of resentment. Dark magic is powered by hate, anger, resentment. We have to get rid of that in order to help him."

"But Albus, you have seen how he treats us. He hates us." said Lily.

"I know it will be a hard task to gain back his confidence and love, but are you not willing to try before it is too late for him?"

"Of course I am." she said confidently.

"I suggest that one of you is there when he wakes up." Dumbledore suggested.

"Wakes up?" Lily asked confused and a bit alarmed. "Did something happen to him?"

"Lily. Remember I told you that Albus had found a way to get into Harry's mind to get that damned memory of his meeting with Black so we could part them from one another?"

"Yes..." she said urging him to continue.

"Well, the method consisted in getting into his mind while he was unconscious."

"You stunned him?" she asked.

"It was the only way Lils." James explained. "What did you want us to do?"

"And you didn't think to ask me what I thought about it? I'm her mother goddamnit."

"Lily, thanks to what we did we have that memory now. We'll be able to keep Black and his bad influence from him. We'll be able to bring him back to our family because of this."

"James, you do realize that if we want him to come back to the family stunning him so we can navigate his mind won't help much, do you?"

"It was the only way, Lily." Dumbledore said. "It wasn't that what landed him in the Hospital Wing, though. All was going well and according to plan when Neville Longbottom and Snape showed up."

"Longbottom tackled him." James explained as he nodded towards Dumbledore.

"The mind link between me and your son was broken in a sudden and painful way. That is what landed him in the Hospital Wing. He took the worse part as he was already unconscious and his mind vulnerable."

"So he's going to be okay?" Lily asked.

"Yes. He will wake up in a few days. He'll be all right." Dumbledore assured her.

"Do you know if he'll remember what happened?" she asked.

"I don't think so." James said. "Karl says he never saw him stun him. After the mind link was broken Harry was awake for a few seconds but I don't think he knew what was going on."

"Maybe we can tell him a different story about what happened. Something that may help you look good in his eyes." the Headmaster suggested.

"That's actually a good idea." James said.

"The matter that worries me most is where he learnt dark magic." Dumbledore said. James and Lily seemed to ponder it for a few seconds before James growled.

"Black. This is what I've been talking about! Ever since they started having regular contact he's been distancing himself from us. When we were young Black was the most open-minded of our entire group concerning dark magic."

"That would make sense." added Lily. "It's been a long time since we fell apart. Could he have built such a dark Aura since then?"

"It is very possible, especially if Harry is as powerful as I believe after inspecting his Aura."

"Harry? Powerful?" asked James skeptically. "He has lost every duel I remember, and he's always struggling in my classes."

"And in Charms too." added Lily.



"Maybe he's downplaying his abilities. Dark magic has a really bad reputation."

"And for a damn good reason." James growled.

"We'll have to look into it I suppose." Dumbledore said. "Anyway, tomorrow, if I have recovered fully and have Madam Pomfrey's consent, I shall head to the Ministry and submit our evidence. With luck, by lunchtime it will all be done."

"And Black won't be able to contact Harry in any way. If he does, he'll spend a few months in Azkaban." James said satisfied.

"Nevertheless we have a limited time frame to bring Harry back to the light side of magic. Once he comes of age the order will be void." explained Dumbledore.

"What about his mail?" asked Lily. "Will the restraining order prevent them from writing to each other?"

"In these cases charms are placed so he won't be able to owl him. If they do, we will know."

"But Albus, he could always write to Longbottom and ask him to pass on his message." James countered.

"That's true, but I don't think he'll try. A violation of a restraining order results in a few months in Azkaban. I'm sure Sirius is fully aware of that so I don't think he will risk it. And even if he did try, I'm going to expel Longbottom, so he won't be able to forward Sirius' or Harry's messages anyway."

"You're going to expel Neville?" asked Lily, shocked.

"Augusta Longbottom won't be pleased." James observed. He was glad though.

"It will only be a temporary expulsion." Dumbledore told them. "If your son Harry's gone dark he may have too. They're best friends after all, I think. Neville Longbottom will be allowed to come back to Hogwarts when he understands that he must distance himself from Harry and Dark Magic. The boy attacked me. In normal circumstances I would let the matter drop. He was shown bravery

and loyalty beyond measure when he defended Harry, and those are things that should be rewarded, not punished. Besides, he was one of the candidates of the Prophecy. I would rather make sure he isn't dark too. Under his grandmother's watchful eye, he'll come back to the Light, I am sure. Being apart from Harry will be beneficial for both of them, and for us."

"How would that be beneficial for us?" asked James.

"In more ways than one, my dear James. I'll convince Augusta to intercept any letters from Harry or Hogwarts sent to Neville and we'll do the same with Harry on this end. Your son will be completely isolated from Neville and Sirius, he'll think he has lost Neville's friendship, and with Sirius out of the picture you'll be the ones to comfort him and influence him to come back to his family and the Light. You'll have to talk to Karl about it. On his end, Longbottom will think that Harry has severed their friendship when his letters come back unopened. I'll make sure Augusta makes Neville see reason and abandon any dark practices Harry may have convinced him to undertake."

.o0o.

The Weasley twins, Hannah and Neville were sitting around their friend. It was well past curfew for Hannah and Neville, but not for the Gryffindors. Seventh years had an extended curfew due to their workload that year. During many minutes they had been heavily criticizing the Potters, Dumbledore, their horde of fans, everything they could think of. They were enraged at what had happened and it felt good to release it this way. Midway through their heated conversation the door opened, startling them.

The Headmaster entered, followed by both Professors Potter and surprisingly for Neville, his grandmother Augusta. All of their angry expressions turned a bit into shock as they saw Augusta Longbottom there. They all had a bad feeling about this, especially Neville.

"Grandmother, what are you doing here?" he asked, startled.

"Abbott, Weasley, leave." barked James, holding the door open for them.

"Which one?" they challenged at the same time.

"Both!" James said icily.

"But we are seventh years! We have extended curfew!" the twins protested.

"Please, we have something to discuss with Mr. Longbottom, in private." Dumbledore explained calmly.

That seemed to do the trick and reluctantly they started making the way to the exit. James told them to go to their common rooms immediately or it would be detention for all of them.

"Poppy? Could you give us some privacy too?" Dumbledore asked the school nurse with a questioning gaze.

"Of course, Albus, I'll be in my Office. Call for me if anything happens." she said nodding at Harry's unconscious form.

"What's going on?" Neville asked at once, slightly intimidated and annoyed by his grandmother's presence.

"Mr. Longbottom, I'm afraid that your actions today cannot, in fact, will not, go unpunished."

"I don't understand. I already received punishment from professor Snape. And if you were not aware, let me tell you that I was defending a fellow student who was being mind raped by the very person who swore to protect his students!" he said hotly.

"He had his parent's permission, Neville. Therefore it is nothing more than an authorised mind exploration, not unlike the ones they do at St. Mungo's." explained his grandmother in a berating tone.

"Semantics! He was probing Harry's mind at will, without any type of control or supervision."

"You're free to think what you wish Mr. Longbottom, but truth is that I did nothing wrong." Dumbledore defended himself.

"You can deceive yourself all you want Headmaster, the fact remains that you did rape his mind. People are sent to Azkaban for

that." Neville said coldly. We'll see what the Board of Governors think about that. He thought.

"Well I will not be. As I've said I had Mr. Potter's permission. That makes it all legal." Dumbledore said arrogantly.

"And what about ordering Karl Potter to attack him so you can play with his mind. Is that legal Professor?" Neville barked.

"My son had nothing to do with this Longbottom! In fact he was the one who found Harry unconscious and alerted us. Seeing he was in no immediate danger from the spell, we chose to perform Legilimency on him that moment so we could spare him the unpleasantness of the process."

"Wait. What spell?" Neville asked.

"The Dark spell that left him in such state. He should have known better than to play with dark magic."

"That's bullshit!" Neville yelled angrily.

"Language Neville!" berated Augusta Longbottom.

"Anyway, about your punishment..." started Dumbledore.

"Are you deaf?" yelled Neville, who already had a hunch that he was going to be expelled. It was the only punishment worse than what Snape had already assigned him. "Snape has already assigned me loads of detention, among many other things!"

"All of that will remain unchanged until your return." said Dumbledore.

"My return?" asked Neville dubiously.

"You are coming home for some months Neville. That should show you how to behave yourself young man!" she lectured him.

"I'm being expelled?" Neville said not really believing it.

"Temporarily, yes. You'll be able to come once you've had time to ponder on your actions."

"You will be able to serve detention with Professor Snape when you come back then." said James smugly. Neville ignored him.

"What about my OWLs? I can't skip class if I am to take them!" Neville tried to argue the decision.

"You'll be receiving your classes from a tutor back at Longbottom Manor." Dumbledore explained.

"And who will be the tutor?"

"That has yet to be decided." replied Dumbledore.

"I hope he makes a better teacher than these two." he said sneering at the Potters. He was really mad at them ever since he had met Harry, and now even more, if it was actually possible. "Flitwick and McGonagall were far better teachers than you."

"Neville!" Augusta screeched. "You should show some respect to your betters!"

"They best me in nothing I care of! What about Harry then?"

"That's none of your business Longbottom." James said biting and inwardly seething at Neville's boldness.

"Of course it is. He's my best friend. Although I don't suppose you understand what that means anymore." said Neville glaring at him.

"What are you on about?" James hissed dangerously.

"What I mean is that you don't have true friends anymore. Only ass-lickers and hysteric fans who only want to meet the Boy-Who-Lived."

"You don't know what you are talking about!"

"Of course I do. The only friend you have is Peter Pettigrew although he only tags along as he has always done! Sirius Black had better sense and walked away from you."

James lost his temper. "Shut up!" he cried as he backhanded Neville.

"James!" Lily cried.

"That's enough Mr. Longbottom. Augusta take him away!"  
Dumbledore instructed her.

.o0o.

The fifth year Hufflepuffs met the next day with the Weasley twins outside the Hospital Wing before breakfast, hoping to see Harry and find Neville. After Hannah had been dismissed from the Hospital Wing the night before, she had joined Susan, Ernie and Justin at the boys' dorm. Justin was annoyed she hadn't told him she had found Harry and Neville. After she had explained what had happened he was more comprehensive. They waited for hours for Neville to come back but he never did.

The following morning they all woke up, still in the boys' dorm. Hannah had fallen asleep in Neville's bed. They went directly to the Hospital Wing, not bothering about breakfast. They hoped to find Neville there. Maybe he had been allowed to stay for the night. Never did it cross their minds that he would have been expelled. They knew it was possible, but life away from Hogwarts was a concept that felt so unreal that they thought they would never see anyone be expelled from Hogwarts. A student suspended for a few months was all they had seen: Summerby, their former Seeker.

As soon as they had arrived they realized that they had been too optimistic, for not only Harry was still knocked out, but Neville wasn't there. They all immediately went to Harry's side. He was still unconscious though he looked better than the night before. Not seeing Neville anywhere, Hannah dragged Susan to Madam Pomfrey's Office to ask her about it. She should know if he was around.

"Ms. Abbott, Ms. Bones, good morning. Here to see Harry?" she asked kindly.

"Well yes, but we were wondering if Neville has come by this morning." The matron's features adopted a somber expression and Hannah frowned, feeling there was something very wrong.

"What is it Madam Pomfrey?" she questioned the nurse.

"Mr. Longbottom was expelled from school yesterday." she said rapidly.

"What?" Hannah whispered, her eyes threatening to let some tears out.

"Why? Madam Pomfrey why was he expelled?" asked Susan while she enveloped Hannah in a hug.

"I suppose it was because of what happened between him and the Headmaster yesterday evening, but I can't be sure. Professor Dumbledore will be making an announcement at this morning's breakfast."

"But he was only defending Harry!" Hannah yelled before she started sobbing quietly.

"I know dear, and I'm truly sorry." Madam Pomfrey said. She sighed and walked past the two girls to check on Harry. "However this is out of my hands."

When she arrived at Harry's bed the rest of the group bombarded her with the same question. They were furious to learn that Neville had been expelled for a thing that Karl Potter would have gotten points for.

.oOo.

By breakfast everybody had already heard of what had happened the previous evening. Students, teachers, and ghosts alike had heard of what Neville had done thanks to the Hogwarts rumor mill. Karl Potter had made sure to expand his own fraudulent chronicle of the occurrence, one that vilified his brother and Neville, although leaving out his own part in the entire incident.

The Slytherins were quite amused when they heard that the Longbottom boy had attacked the Headmaster and that the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived had gone dark. They were quite pleased when they heard about it. Contrarily to the House of the Snake, the students of the remaining Houses were horrified, especially the Gryffindor sheep. Such rumors were to be expected if anyone attacked Dumbledore or the Boy-Who-Lived in any way. They were the beacons of Light; everyone admired and listened to them, ready

to follow their orders. Anyone against them would automatically earn the Dark or Evil tag. Harry and Neville's absence that morning only helped to give the rumors more credibility. Only a handful of people knew what had really happened the night before, including some fifth year Hufflepuffs and two seventh year pranksters.

Suddenly a clinking sound was heard and all students turned to see Dumbledore rising from his chair, which was more of a throne, at his place in the Head Table.

"May I have your attention please?" the Hall quieted down after a few seconds of clatter. "Thank you, it is my duty to inform you that one of your fellow students, Neville Longbottom, has been indeed temporarily expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for an indeterminate amount of time. I know that many, many rumors about what may or may have not have happened, have already been spread around the school. I know that you're all itching to know what really happened. Well, I'm afraid that neither me, nor any of my staff members will be releasing any information of the occurrence anytime soon. That information will remain a private matter between Mr. Longbottom and myself. Thank you."

"Typical Dumbledore." Fred muttered annoyed.

"Leave it to him to offer a vague explanation that doesn't discredit any of these foul rumors going around." George agreed.

"Seriously, the gossip about Harry wanting to murder Dumbledore as a birthday gift to You-Know-Who is quite too overdone." Fred commented.

"I think Dumbledore needs to be pranked too."

"Too?"

"Well, we're not going to let what Potter and his dumber son did to Harry go unpunished are we?"

"Of course not!"

The two of them abandoned whatever breakfast they had left and hurried out of the Great Hall with dozens of ideas that needed to be thoroughly considered.



.o0o.

Neville had arrived at Longbottom Manor the night before. After leaving the Hospital Wing he was directly taken back home. He wasn't allowed to say goodbye to Hannah, or the twins. He wasn't even allowed to pack his things. An elf had already done that for him. He and his grandmother walked to Hogsmeade and there they called for the Knight Bus. During all the journey Neville had to endure an endless lecture about proper behavior, respecting your elders, and surprisingly for Neville, the dangers of dark magic. If anyone asked him, he would swear that Augusta Longbottom thought he had gone dark.

Upon arriving home Augusta Longbottom had the intention of continuing with her lecture, but Neville decided he'd already had enough and went straight to bed not bothering to listen to his grandmother's rant. He slammed the door forcefully and fitted a chair between the doorknob and the floor, a way to effectively block doors without resorting to magic. It was a muggle trick Harry had shown him. Mrs. Longbottom was not amused when she couldn't get in. After the standard unlocking spells failed to open the door, she started going on and on about how Neville had used Dark Magic, no doubt learnt from Harry, to shut the door. Neville yelled at her through the door if she saw any Ministry owls delivering a warning for using magic out of school, hoping that would shut her up so he could sleep. It did not. Never thinking that a muggle trick could be far more useful than a spell, she expressed her absurd belief that Neville had also used dark magic to conceal his use of magic. Neville was seconds away from silencing his room, which would certainly get him in trouble, when his grandmother desisted. She did not come back, so Neville had time to think and sulk. He was far too riled up to go to sleep right now.

.o0o.

HOPE YOU DON'T FLAME ME. THINGS CONTINUE TO LOOK DOWN FOR HARRY, UNFORTUNATELY, BUT WILL GET BETTER, I PROMISE. HE'S JUST LOST A FRIEND FOR SOME TIME, BUT HE'S GAINED A WHOLE BUNCH OF THEM IN THE HUFFLEPUFF FIFTH YEARS. LET'S SEE WHAT THEY COME UP WITH TO GET NEVILLE BACK.

HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT AND YOU REVIEW IT... PLEASEEEEE:)

## Chapter 14: Restrained

Sirius Black was peacefully snoring in his bed when he was woken by a loud humming noise that came from the bedside table. He sat up, groaning, and looked around. He was alone. He frowned because he recalled having spent the night with this beautiful brunette he had met in Diagon Alley the night before. He was starting to think she had left without even saying goodbye, anyway, the kind of thing Sirius Black would do. He looked briefly at his clock and grumbled when he saw it was 'only' quarter past nine. The irritating noise continued so he rolled to the other side of his bed and opened the drawer of the nightstand. Inside a blue mirror was shaking wildly. It was the mirror with which he communicated with Harry and his friend Neville, so he grabbed it and the noise and trembling stopped. He was surprised when Harry's face didn't appear in the mirror, but Neville's.

"Hey... Sox!" he said with a grin, remembering his nickname. Neville would have scowled at it if he hadn't been scowling already. "What are you doing calling me so early in the morning? Is everything ok?"

"Mr. Black..." Neville started.

"I recall telling you to call me Sirius, or Padfoot. After all I get to call you Sox." Sirius said as he yawned.

"Ok, Padfoot, you do realize it's already quarter past nine, right?" Neville asked amusedly.

"Yes... Wait!" he said suddenly. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"No, I shouldn't." Neville said with a sigh. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Last night I was temporarily expelled from Hogwarts."

"What? Why? And what about Harry? What about my godson?"

"He ended up at the Hospital Wing." Neville replied slowly. "I still don't know if I was the lucky one of the two."

"What the hell happened?" Sirius demanded.

"Dumbledore raped his mind, and I tackled him to stop what he was doing to Harry."

"What?" Sirius yelled indignantly. "Dumbledore actually did that? What did James have to say about that?"

"He was ok with it. He actually gave permission to Dumbledore and had Karl stun Harry so they could bypass Harry's mental Animagus defense."

"That bastard! I can't even believe he'd do that to his own blood. Having someone raping your mind like that..." Sirius trailed off shocking his head.

"Madam Pomfrey told me that he'll be waking up in two or three days at most. It could be right now, after dinner, tomorrow... Who knows?"

"I'll call him through the mirror if he hasn't contacted me by then."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. His mirror was smashed when his brother attacked him. I was in detention when they got him, we were talking through the mirrors. That's how I saw it happen."

"Damn brat! At least do you have someone who can keep you posted about his state?" Sirius asked hopefully.

"I do. I'll owl them as soon as possible." Neville said thinking about Hannah and the twins.

"Good. Until then I think I'll head to Hogwarts. I gotta see how Harry's doing. And set things straight with some people."

"Call me as soon as you know anything."

"Will do."

.o0o.

As soon as he apparated into the tunnel that connected the castle to the adjacent wizarding village, Sirius started to walk rapidly towards the end of the tunnel. Having used it during many years to sneak out of the school, he knew perfectly well his way in the darkness.

Nevertheless, he decided to transform into his Grim-like dog animagus form, to see better and reach the school faster.

It took him less than five minutes to reach the One-Eyed Witch statue at the third floor, which was the entrance into the school. From there, he went down to levels, where the Hospital Wing was, where Harry was. He arrived to a long and wide corridor. The double doors to the Hospital Wing were at the end. He resumed his human form and walked rapidly to his destination. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't appreciate a Grim running into her domain. And when he was about to reach them, only a few feet away...

"Stop right there Sirius." a commanding voice said behind him.

He spun around and saw Dumbledore standing a few feet away. Sirius glanced at him with loathing and turned around to resume his way towards the Hospital Wing. He had to see Harry first. Then he would deal with Dumbledore and the Potters. Just then he heard footsteps, and a second later, two Aurors emerged from a corridor and blocked the doors to the Hospital Wing. They were Tonks and Kingsley, and they had their wands drawn, but not pointed at him though. Sirius stared at them, confused.

"What's going on here?" Sirius demanded, taking out his own wand.

"You tell me, Sirius." Dumbledore said

"I'm here to see Harry. What are they doing here?" he asked pointing at Tonks and Kingsley. The two Aurors exchanged uneasy looks and Dumbledore frowned.

"Did you not receive a Ministry letter this morning?" the Headmaster asked. He should have received the notification of the restraining order as soon as he got up.

"I did." Sirius replied slowly. "Didn't have the time to read it though. Got word that my godson had been attacked and left in a hurry." he said accusingly.

"Gossip travels fast." Dumbledore observed. "Gossips tend to be inexact most of the time though. Harry was never attacked." he lied. "He messed up some magics he should have never touched."

"Don't give that bull to me Dumbledore." Sirius barked. "I know exactly what happened. His brother Karl attacked him, and you raped his mind then."

Tonks gasped and Kingsley looked very surprised.

"Yes." Sirius said in confirmation when he saw the Aurors look surprised. "And what's worse, James allowed it to happen. I want to see Harry. Now!" he cried.

"That's not possible." Dumbledore said. His voice had a hint of smugness in it.

"You'll find that it is perfectly possible." Sirius told him. Then he started to walk towards the Hospital Wing.

"You go through that door, and you'll be in Azkaban by nightfall." Dumbledore announced. Sirius stopped right in his tracks.

"What? Are you threatening me?"

"That was not a threat. It is but a mere fact. The letter you didn't bother opening this morning was a notification about a Restraining Order being set. You are not allowed anywhere near Harry Potter."

"I don't believe it!" Sirius said resuming his walk towards the doors guarded by Tonks and Kingsley.

"Out of my way!" Sirius barked menacingly.

"You know I can't do that." Kingsley said. "Sirius, if you really didn't read that notification we will be able to overlook this first violation of the order, which would normally result in three months in Azkaban. But Sirius, my friend, I won't be able to cover for you if you go inside. I cannot possibly overlook a second deliberate violation of the order, and that would mean a year in that dreadful place. Come on, think about it." said Kingsley to his former partner in the Auror Division.

"This isn't fair." Sirius growled in despair.

"I know, but it's how things are. Maybe, if you talk to the Potters..." Kingsley proposed, but Sirius had already left. He was furious.

"This is your doing!" he yelled accusingly at Dumbledore.

"I assure you it isn't, Sirius. It was James and Lily who-" the headmaster started.

He was cut short when Sirius punched him violently in the face. The old wizard fell to the floor with a thud and a noticeable crack. At that age it was probable that he might have broken some bone in the fall along with his already fractured jaw. Sirius loomed over him with his wand pointed at Dumbledore's neck.

"Our world would be far better off without people like you in it."

"You're really going to do it? You would kill me?" Dumbledore asked skeptically, with a swollen lip.

"Sirius let go off him!" Kingsley commanded as he came up behind him.

"The only reason I'm not is because I hope Harry gets the chance one day! You have no right to interfere in people's lives like you always do." he hissed at him.

Sirius felt two strong arms wrap around his shoulders and pull him off the injured Headmaster.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Tonks asked him irritably as she and Kingsley bent over Dumbledore. Sirius and she had a good relationship, but disappointingly she had always respected Dumbledore far too much and was in his Order.

"He deserves that and more." Sirius hissed.

"Wait here!" she instructed as she and Kingsley carried Dumbledore to the Hospital Wing.

For a moment Sirius was tempted to go in and see Harry, but remembering what Kingsley had told him he decided to leave before they came back for him.

.o0o.

"We just can't let them get away with this." Hannah said desperately.

The twins, the Hufflepuff fifth years and her were sitting at the Hufflepuff table during lunch the day after. Their disheartened moods still lingered. They picked at their food while thinking about the injustice of what Dumbledore and James Potter had done to Harry and Neville and how helpless they felt. For years the Potters had gotten away with loads of things, partly because of Dumbledore's favour and partly because of their own fame. Now history was repeating itself and it looked like this matter was going to be swept under the carpet as if nothing had happened.

"I agree. They must pay." Justin said after a brief pause.

"And we're going to be the ones to do that?" Ernie asked skeptically and looking at them as if they weren't right on the head. Hannah and the twins looked at him indignantly. Susan smacked the back of his head.

"Of course we are you prick!" Hannah said irately.

"I'm sorry, I'm just saying that the Potters and Dumbledore wrongfully expelled Neville, put Harry in a coma-like state in the Hospital Wing, and let's not forget about Summerby. He was expelled for a brief duel with Karl Potter. I only mean that I don't want to end up in any of those situations."

"So you vote for doing anything?" Hannah asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I didn't say that." he argued. "If you come up with a plan I'll help you no matter what. But we have to tread carefully."

"I agree." George said happily. "This is why we've been thinking about pranking them big time!"

"I don't think that's what he meant by treading carefully." Justin said with a small smile.

"We know." Fred said. "We're open to other ideas though."

"Yes. Even the best of pranks would prove to be quite lacking."

"What will the prank be like?" Susan asked.



"Oh, that would be telling." the redheads answered enigmatically.  
"Anyway. Any ideas?"

"Well, as far as I'm concerned the only people in disposition to help us are the members of the Board of Governors of the school." Hannah said determinedly. "I don't think they'll appreciate Dumbledore and James Potter conspiring to use Legilimency on a student, no matter if it was his son or not."

"And how do we do that? I mean, what does a student normally do when he wants to address them? Write a letter?"

"We could try that." Ernie declared.

"The problem is," Susan said, "that I don't think they would take us seriously. I mean, come on, James Potter and Albus Dumbledore, respected light sided wizards mind raping a student? Most probably they would think it's some kind of prank or trick and ask Dumbledore about it before doing anything."

"And we know hot that would end. I don't know who's in the Board, but I've heard that they are fond of Dumbledore and the Potters."

"Well not all of them are." Ernie said, his head perking up.

"Who are you referring to?"

"Seriously guys. Who's been constantly bragging about his Father being in the Board of Governors ever since we stepped into this school?" Ernie asked with a disbelieving look.

.o0o.

Draco Malfoy was having a very amusing day. Just a few minutes ago he had seen how Dumbledore was carried into the Hospital Wing with a bleeding nose, and let's not forget there had been the great scandal first thing in the morning involving Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom and Dumbledore. Everybody seemed to agree that Neville had tackled the Headmaster while the old wizard was doing something to Harry Potter. At breakfast the Headmaster had given credit to the rumour simply by not saying it just wasn't true. About what was Dumbledore doing to Harry Potter when he got tackled

there were many theories flying around. According to the most spread gossip, which was unreliable at best, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived's twin, had been discovered delving into the Dark Arts of magic and something had gone wrong for him. Supposedly Dumbledore was helping him, but to Draco, that didn't make sense. Harry Potter wasn't dark. He was sure of that.

Before the start of the fifth year, his father Lucius had taken him aside and told him that the Dark Lord had a mission for him. He would be properly rewarded with a privileged spot in the Death eaters if he did well. Of course he had been overly excited and proud to be given a chance to join. 'Watch Harry Potter...' his father had told him, relaying the message from Voldemort. The blonde teenager had been sceptical about his assignment at first. What did Voldemort want with the useless brother of the Dark Lord's nemesis? Lucius had never answered him that question. He only told him again to watch Harry Potter all year long.

And Draco had. Ever since the start of the term he had observed him, followed him, and learnt everything he could about him. It was then when he realized how little he knew about him, how little people knew about the Boy-Who-Lived's twin brother. Draco would normally tail Harry himself when they were out of class, especially during the first weeks of school, when the excitement at being in an assignment for the Dark Lord was still fresh. However, a couple of months into the school year he had started to use Crabbe and Goyle to do the dirty work. That had worked well until Draco realized fully how clumsy and obvious they were when following Harry.

But anyway, back to the initial topic, if Harry hadn't been practising dark magic, what had gotten him unconscious in the first place, before Dumbledore got to him. Now, that was the real question. He wished he knew what had exactly happened. He knew the Dark Lord would want to know the real side to the story, so it was his duty to find out.

That could wait a few minutes though. He was starving! Along with his two minions and the ever present and ever bothering Pansy he went to the Great Hall to have lunch.

He sat in his usual place at the Slytherin table, and much to his surprise, a letter appeared in a silver plate instead of a plate filled with that day's food. It had a simple Malfoy written in it. He frowned

at it, and looking sideways he assessed everybody present at the Hall looking for anyone or anything suspicious. He had seen many pranks happen at the Great Hall during meals since his first year. He prided himself in having escaped all of them, or at least those that were addressed to him exclusively. The manner in which the letter was delivered was certainly suspicious. If this letter was some sort of trick he wasn't about to be reckless about it.

He took out his wand and performed a few standard diagnosis spells looking for anything strange in it. Nothing came up. He wasn't satisfied though and kept trying, to no avail. Flustered he gave up after a few minutes. His paranoid attitude wasn't over though. He gave the letter a quick and suspicious glance and turned to his minion, Crabbe.

"Open it." he instructed him. The plump boy gave him a look as if saying 'Do it yourself.' Draco looked at him angrily.

"I'll have your dessert." Crabbe said as a non-negotiable condition before Draco could threaten him into doing it.

"Done." Draco said immediately. Despite his instincts told him the letter might be a prank, he was greatly intrigued by what might be inside. Perhaps it was the timing of it all. Crabbe took the letter and tore it open with his greasy fingers. Nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"Don't look at its contents. Just hand it over to me." Draco told Crabbe as he was about to unfold the piece of parchment and read it. Crabbe did as he was bid and passed it over to him.

.o0o.

From the Hufflepuff table, the fifth years looked at the blonde Slytherin with anticipation. It had taken him ages to read its contents, probably thanks to Fred and George's reputation. They sighed with relief when Malfoy folded and pocketed the letter with a satisfied smirk on his face. It had taken him quite a while to open it, let alone read it. Fortunately though, after the Slytherin had reread it several times it, seemed their plan had worked.

"Ok. Let's see where does this take us."

.o0o.

THERE YOU GO! ANOTHER CHAPTER UP. I HOPED YOU LIKED SEEING SIRIUS AND THE HUFFLEPUFFS STICK UP FOR HARRY AND NEVILLE.

I HAVE A PRANK FOR JAMES AND DUMBLEDORE IN MIND, BUT I'M NOT PERFECTLY HAPPY WITH IT. I WOULD REALLY APPRECIATE SOME IDEAS ON WHAT COULD THE PRANK BE LIKE. REMEMBER, IT BEING FUNNY ISN'T THE ESSENTIAL BIT. IT ALSO HAS TO BE PRETTY HUMILLIATING FOR THOSE PRANKED.

HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT, HOPE YOU TAKE THE TIME TO REVIEW.

## Chapter 15: Wake Up Call

Three days later, he was woken by the sound of a bell ringing distantly. The Hospital Wing's ceiling was the first view Harry had once he woke up and he instantly knew that he was once again in the Hospital Wing and under Madam Pomfrey's care. He didn't quite remember what had happened for him to end up here. Though it wasn't extremely common in his life, he had gotten used to end up there at least one time a year, and normally it was in a serious condition. After being hexed by his brother and Weasley in first year, the duel with Karl on the second, the Dementor incident in third year and the short lived duel with Barty Crouch Jr. last year.

Harry had a look around and found Lily sitting nearby table marking some essays. She was the only one there, which was weird, absolutely weird. First because there was nobody else was waiting beside his bed. Harry surmised that it was not a weekend else Neville would be here right now. He was probably in class right now. Secondly, she was actually there. His parents had never stood by his bed while waiting for him to recover. So why was she there? For a moment he imagined that she was worried about him and that she actually cared for his condition. Harry forced the thought out of his mind. He didn't dare to hope for such a thing. Every time he had hoped before, he had ended up being hurt. She didn't seem very worried about him at all. She was visibly relaxed, unlike when she waited for Karl's recovery many times over these years. Harry mentally praised himself for not allowing himself such hopes.

Harry didn't make any movement or sound that would alert her of his consciousness. Instead he remained silent, not wishing to speak to her. Luckily she would leave to teach Charms and he would be able to 'officially' wake up. For a while it worked. He fooled Lily successfully, but once Madam Pomfrey came out of her office she recognized his act straight away.

"I see you're finally up Mr. Potter." she said cheerfully. Lily looked up and Harry spotted his not so real smile.

"How are you feeling sweetie?" Harry looked at her bewildered. Sweetie? Where had that come from? She had not called him that probably since Voldemort's downfall. What was going on?

"Mr. Potter?" asked Pomfrey after a few seconds of silence.

"I'm fine." he replied to the nurse.

"No headaches? Nausea? Dizziness?" she asked methodically as she waved his wand over his head.

"No, nothing. I'm feeling ok." he said dismissively.

"Are you sure?" asked Lily caressing his hair. There it was again. Lily caressing his hair lovingly? That was simply not natural. She was definitely acting weirdly.

"Quite." he said still confused. "I don't remember how I came to be here though."

"Signs of amnesia." Madam Pomfrey muttered under her breath while she wrote it down in his medical file.

"Amnesia?" Harry asked a bit frightened.

"Don't worry. In these cases it is not unheard of." The nurse soothed him. "You should start remembering in a week or two at most, with luck."

"What is the last thing you remember sweetheart?" Lily asked. Harry looked at him really confounded before answering.

"I.. I was in the Great Hall, having lunch after the transfiguration period. Then I went back to the common room to get-" Harry stopped abruptly. I went to fetch Sirius' mirror so I could talk to Neville who had detention, he remembered.

"To get what?" Lily asked softly.

"I can't remember." Harry said blinking a few times. "After that I think I was going somewhere, and then, nothing. I don't remember anything more after that." he finished sincerely. He did remember being in a corridor and talking to Neville through the mirror, but nothing more. His memory ended up abruptly around that time. "So what happened?"

"You were found by your brother in a deserted corridor. You were unconscious and he alerted your father and Dumbledore."

"Karl? Karl actually kind of 'rescued' me?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes." Lily declared. "Dumbledore took you to a nearby classroom to check you while Karl alerted Madam Pomfrey." she explained. The school nurse, Harry noticed with a side glance had become suddenly tense and had walked away. "The Headmaster feared you were under some dark spell."

"Somebody attacked me?" Harry flabbergasted. If it hadn't been Karl, who would have attacked him, the unnoticed brother of the Boy-Who-Lived?

"We aren't sure if anyone attacked you at all Harry. Dumbledore says that it looked as if you had cast the spell yourself and somehow it had gone wrong." Lily said with a 'pained' voice.

"Oh." Harry said in confusion. This didn't make any sense. "Wait! What? I don't know any Dark spells!" he protested. Lily ignored the protest.

"He moved to protect your mind from its influence. Then your friend Longbottom entered the room and jumped to the wrong conclusions. He attacked the Headmaster and the dark spell had enough time to sink in."

Harry nodded slowly. It would be quite a believable tale, Harry thought, if it wasn't for the part where he would do Dark Magic, or that his brother would willingly help him, or that he would be taken to a nearby class rather than to the Hospital Wing. All in all it didn't make sense. He would have to ask Neville about it.

"Here take these." said Madam Pomfrey as she came back handing him a vial filled with a yellowish potion. "If you have headaches take one single gulp, not more." she said clearly.

"Does this mean I can leave?" Harry asked her.

"There's no reason for you to be here. My diagnosis spells have all come out normal. You're free to go." But remember, if you feel nausea, dizziness, headaches..."

"I come back here immediately, right?" Harry cut in.

"That's it." The matron confirmed.

Harry felt he was lucky. Madam Pomfrey normally kept her patients under her watchful eye for days. Speaking of days, he wondered how many days he'd been knocked out.

"What day's today?" he asked, giving voice his thoughts.

"It's Friday." she answered.

"I've been unconscious for four days?" Harry nearly yelled.

"I'm afraid so." Lily told him.

He got up awkwardly and took his wand and his glasses from the bedside table. A quick tempus showed him it was quarter past nine in the morning. He was tempted to ask if Sirius had written to him or if he was even aware of what had happened to him, but he wisely decided against it. He knew how his mother would react.

"I'm going to class." he said while he transfigured his clothes into the school uniform.

"You don't have to. You've already been excused from today's classes." she told him.

"We weren't expecting you to wake up until the weekend at the very least Mr. Potter." Poppy added.

"Well, I guess I'll head to my common room until lunchtime then." He would be mirroring Sirius and telling him the awkwardness of the situation he was in. Maybe he had some answers. He picked up his bag which had been left at the side of his bed and headed to the door.

"See you later darling."

Harry was far too confused to answer so he left without another word.

As soon as he was out of the Infirmary he searched his bag for the mirror but didn't find it. Neville must have taken it before they found



it. He thought, or rather hoped. For a while he roamed absentmindedly the castle's empty halls, not really caring where his footsteps took him. It was still another hour until the first period finished when he would be able to talk to Neville about yesterday's happenings. Not having much to do until then and with far too many things in his head, he settled for doing nothing, except patiently waiting for the minutes to tick off while he thought things through.

His mother's strange behavior was a thing that troubled him very much. After many crushed hopes, Harry had learnt not to trust his parents' actions. They had always ruined Harry's expectations one way or another if he allowed himself to think that they were starting to love and care for him. With that in mind, Harry took the only plausible conclusion. They were up to something, again. Being sent to Dumbledore a couple of days ago and his brother's sudden compassion only helped confirm that theory.

His thoughts drifted then to a certain Ravenclaw in his year. Although he wasn't an expert on this subject due to his inexperience, having shared some nice conversations with Riley where she was openly friendly to him, Harry had started to think that he may have had a chance that she would agree to go out with him. That is until he had seen his brother and her at breakfast Monday morning, talking in such a friendly manner. Flirting wasn't the word, yet Harry thought that their talk was too friendly. Suddenly, all the confidence he had developed over the last years where he could be only Harry around his only friend Neville, who didn't judge him because of his brother's fame, had disappeared briefly for a moment. All the insecurity he had once had before Hogwarts had come back. Seeing Riley talking to Karl had once again made him think what he had always been showed to believe by his family and wizarding population. Karl was the better twin and would get whatever he wanted, and Harry would not, never. Something snapped inside Harry, and remembering how much he had grown up since then, he resolved to beat his brother. He would ask Riley out before his brother even had the chance to think about it. Karl had always gotten what Harry wanted, but not this time, he thought.

Moreover Harry needed to talk to Neville about what had happened the night he had been taken to the Hospital Wing. Harry had in fact remembered being jerked awake by a sudden and unbearable pain inside his head, but had not told Madam Pomfrey or her mother

about it. Then he had been taken to the Hospital Wing by Neville. That was all he remembered.

He sighed at his mental turmoil and found that he had made his way to the clock tower without really intending to. He checked the time and saw that he had little time left to head down to the greenhouses, where Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were supposed to be right now. He lightened up a bit at the prospect of talking to Neville and Riley. Maybe he could make her see he was the better twin.

The greenhouses happened to be some floors right beneath him, so after checking he was alone, he climbed to the balustrade and transformed into Horus. He made a dive and landed just outside Madam Sprout's enclosure. He retreated to a corner that hid him from view and came out again in his human form. Then he sat in the grass with his back leaning against the stone castle's outer walls for a few minutes observing the castle's grounds. After a few minutes the noise of the door opening broke him out of his reverie. He got up.

Padma Patil was the first to come through the door. She looked up and let out a small yelp of fright after seeing him. Harry thought he might have frightened her by appearing so unexpectedly and out of nowhere, but he was taken aback when she also paled considerably after that and hurried off rapidly giving him suspicious and fearful glances. He frowned and then Riley came out after her housemate. His heart dropped when she too looked a bit fearful, ignored his greeting and continued her way to the castle without talking to him. She ignored him too when he called after her.

He stood there frozen in the spot for a few seconds. The other Ravenclaws got past him, albeit keeping their distance. Harry even didn't notice. He was looking fixedly at Riley's retreating back. Her behavior and that of her housemates' had left him far more confused than he was after leaving the Hospital Wing. What was the matter with her? Had he done anything wrong? In fact, what was wrong with the Ravenclaws?

When he finally snapped out of it, he turned to the door. He frowned at the thought that he had seen many Ravenclaws leave, but not a single Hufflepuff, and definitely not Neville. He opened the door and stared at a strange sight. All the Hufflepuffs in his year were discussing something with their Head of House, and strangely

enough for him, Neville wasn't there. Their argument was interrupted when Harry asked the only question that came to his mind.

"Where's Neville?"

.o0o.

Neville was in fact laying in his bed back at Longbottom Manor, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. He had finished lunch a while ago, and now he was waiting for his new tutor to come by for the first class. He didn't know who was going to teach him. Apparently Dumbledore had only told Augusta that he would arrange for someone to come by and had never got around to tell her who this person would be. Neville could only hope that he, or she, was a competent teacher, not like others he had experienced in the past such as Quirrell, Lockhart, Umbridge, Binns or Snape.

Having nothing to do until then, he had decided to relax in his room, away from her grandmother's disapproving stares like he had done for the past four days. Seemingly she was sorely disappointed in him. She did not condone with what Neville had done to his Headmaster and she would pay no mind to his explanations about Harry's mind being raped in the first place. It was only in the privacy of his bedroom where he could relax and think about recent events.

It had already been four days since he had left school and none of his many letters to Harry, Hannah or the twins had been replied. He could understand Harry wouldn't reply if he was still unconscious, but certainly the twins, or Hannah should have by now. Since he had arrived, he had talked to Sirius a few times and none of them were to have a relaxed chat precisely. They were all about finding out if Harry had woken up yet and why no letters were coming back.

Neville had been incredibly amused and pleased when Sirius had told him about how he had broken Dumbledore's nose. However, the happiness had been short lived as Sirius had told him about the Restraining Order then. Apparently Dumbledore and the Potters had been planning it for such a long time that they had made it nearly impossible for Sirius to find a way to revoke it. As the Head of the House of Black, he had hired some of the best wizarding lawyers, but so far they hadn't done much progress.

A soft humming noise filled Neville's room. He recognized it immediately. The mirror. Sirius was calling him again. He picked it up.

"Hey Padfoot." he said half-heartedly.

"Hey Sox! Any letters yet?" Sirius asked him with the same eagerness and preoccupation in his voice as the days before.

"No. And I don't think I'll ever get them. I know Harry would've tried to contact us by now if he was awake. So would the twins and Hannah."

"That's weird." Sirius frowned, and after some seconds his eyes widened. "There has to be something blocking your mail. There must be."

Neville raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Is that even possible?" he asked skeptically.

Sirius grinned. "Of course it's possible. With magic, it all is."

"So how do you stop owls from delivering their letters?" Neville replied still doubting it could be done so easily.

"Oh, there are many ways. Wards, charms, shooting down any owls that come near you... But the important question here isn't how, it's who, and why."

"Dumbledore?" asked Neville after a few seconds pondering what Sirius had said.

"Yeah. That's exactly who I was thinking about."

"But why would he do that?"

"For the same reason he expelled you?"

"Which is?" Neville inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Well I don't know that, yet, but he did so for some reason, and this seems to follow the same pattern. The only thing we know for sure is that he wants you isolated from the rest of the world."

"I don't understand why he would want me to be isolated from the rest of the world."

"Well, maybe it isn't you then who he wants isolated. I think that if Dumbledore wanted something from you, he wouldn't have expelled you. He would have you at the castle where he could watch you. I think it is Harry who he wants to keep isolated."

"So why would he scan my mail. He could easily block all of Harry's incoming and out coming mail."

"He would have to intercept all your mail too in case Harry used an intermediary to send you a letter."

"Then none of my letters have reached their addressees. Harry must think that we've deserted him. I mean, no mirror, we can't respond any letters he may write, and we cannot send our own because they won't reach him. He might not even know that there's a restraining order between the two of you. Telling Harry about it would only make Harry more difficult for his parents."

Sirius visibly paled at this. If Harry snapped and he somehow managed to sneak out of school and come and see him and find out what was going on, the restraining ward would go off and it would be Azkaban for him.

"We have to warn him!" Sirius said hysterically. "He doesn't know I could land in Azkaban if he tries to contact me!"

"We do." Neville agreed. "Right now he must be thinking that I don't want to be friends with him anymore. And the same thing about you." Neville agreed looking sad.

"Right, so how do we do this? How can we get a message to him without it being intercepted?" Sirius wondered aloud.

"Is there any type of mail that it's not legal to monitor?" Neville asked after a few seconds. "Bank statements, Ministry notifications, newspaper subscriptions, anything?"

"It is illegal to intercept those, although I wouldn't put it behind Dumbledore to do it."

"Well, we have to try. Harry doesn't have a personal account other than his trust vault which is managed by his parents."

"So Gringotts mail would raise suspicions. I could try to get someone from the Ministry to send along a message, but if discovered, it would be a violation of the restraining order. An advertisement on the news would be pretty much the same thing."

"I could be the one to write it so you won't get into trouble, but I doubt that the message would get through. He hasn't got a subscription, and besides, how many fifth year students read the advertisements at the end of the paper?"

"Neville, I got it! I think there may be a way." Sirius announced suddenly after a few moments of silent thought. "The only way that he'll read the paper is if there's something big in it. Something that attracts all of the students attention. Like one of those editions where the copies of the newspaper don't stop changing hands for a couple of days. I could give an interview to some reporter and denounce the Potters for the restraining order. I have some dirt on them to ensure that I make the front page. If there's something that Harry wouldn't miss in the Prophet is a bashing of the Potters by Sirius Black, especially when he discovers about their little legal measure."

"Now we only have to find a reporter who has the guts to write the story."

"Oh, I've got someone in mind already." Sirius said with a mischievous smile.

"Who? Rita Skeeter?" Neville asked, his eyes sparkling with mischief too.

Sirius frowned. "Rita Skeeter?" he repeated looking a bit stunned. "Well, no. She isn't the one I had in mind but, good thinking Sox! I certainly agree that she's the person we're looking for."

"You realize that after you do this they will crush you, metaphorically speaking of course."

"Yes, they will destroy any reputation I may have left here. But it doesn't matter. Harry told me that you two would probably be leaving the country after you finished school. Harry offered me to come with."

"That would be great, although many things can happen until then. Hell, until the beginning of last week Harry and I were only normal students. In a week I've been expelled, you're magically restrained from seeing Harry and he spent three nights in the Hospital wing after having nearly snuffed it a while after being attacked." Neville explained with a little shock in his face while realizing how things had gone so wrong at so many levels in the last few days. He also omitted that since Hannah and he were growing closer every day, their plan to move out of the country didn't seem so appealing. Maybe she would agree to come with them.

"I'll get onto it right now then. Make sure to get yourself a subscription for the Prophet."

"Don't worry about that. Already got it."

"I don't rightfully know how long it will take. I have to get the evidence and then convince Skeeter to do it. Well I'll call you as soon as it's done."

"See you." Neville said as Sirius face faded off the mirror.

.o0o.

Please Read and Review. Let me know what you think!

Still looking for ideas for the upcoming prank on Dumbledore and James Potter. I appreciate every suggestion made, and found them all interesting in their own way. Maybe I'll mix up several ideas, so just leave your ideas along with a review ;). It would be much appreciated.

## Chapter 16: Alone

Dear Draco,

the curious information about Dumbledore and the Potters in your last letter was very welcome. I have looked into it, and despite having no real proof at all, I have managed to bring it to the Board of Governors. They have agreed to have a hearing with the parts involved, but I fear, however, that the Board of Governors is still very friendly towards that muggle-loving fool and won't back me up when I suggest that he is removed from his position along with James Potter. We hope nevertheless that it helps destabilize his grip over the Wizarding Society.

I was proud to inform the Dark Lord about your progress. He tells me he's satisfied with this letter and presently happy with your reports about Harry Potter. He insists that you keep up the good work and maybe you'll be granted the great honor of joining us in his ranks once you're old enough.

Your Mother and I are very proud of you son, as is the Dark Lord.

Lucius Malfoy

.oOo.

Harry sat alone in his room. His new Hufflepuff friends had recently left allowing him some privacy to digest what they had just explained him. First there was the matter that he had been mind raped by Dumbledore, not messed up with some dark spell like his 'dear' mother had told him. The Headmaster might maneuver alleging that he had James' permission and that what he did was totally legal, but the truth is that he had been stunned by Karl in a cowardly attack so that he couldn't defend himself from such intrusion, or so the Hufflepuffs had told him. He was more inclined to believe them over his own parents. There, that was a happy thought. Madam Pomfrey's sudden change of attitude while Lily explained what had happened helped prove Neville's side of the story.

Harry was sure that Dumbledore had gotten what he was looking for, but still, he didn't know why he needed it so badly. He squashed the crumpled copy of today's Prophet that he had in his hands angrily. Of course the attack on the Headmaster and Chief Warlock was



already common knowledge and the Prophet hadn't wasted time in putting the story to paper, even if it was the fake side of it. It was left unsaid that Harry had been stunned by his brother instead of being knocked out by a dark spell. This had made him gain the reputation of an evil Dark wizard on his way to join Voldemort. If you were a Slytherin it was a given that you knew Dark Magic and nobody pestered you about it, but if a member of any of the three other Houses was found practicing Dark Magic, he was labeled as an upcoming Dark Lord. From what his house mates had told him it seemed he was believed to be the next Dark Lord in the making according to some of the students, and Voldemort's future heir to others. None of the people involved in the incident did as much as lift a finger to defend him against such foul lies. It was yet another sign of his parents' animosity towards him. They believed every lie that was printed by the press without even asking their own son about it. Neville had come out of this better than him. His attack on the Headmaster was explained as a misunderstanding of what was going on at the time and was left at that.

Then there was the matter that Neville had been expelled from school. Surely Dumbledore wouldn't have expelled him if didn't have any good reasons apart from having been attacked by Neville. In normal circumstances Dumbledore wouldn't have done anything harsher than docking points off and assigning detentions. The man wasn't very keen in expelling his students. In fact, Neville was the second one he had expelled in all his years as a Headmaster at Hogwarts. Another Hufflepuff had been the first and not so many days ago. His name was Summerby, the Hufflepuff Seeker before Harry, and he had only done so due to the Potters' pressure. Karl claimed that he had attacked him and Dumbledore chose to expel him after many arguments with both the Charms and Transfiguration professors. He was sure now that his parents were responsible for Neville being expelled. Is that why Lily had acted so strangely at the Hospital Wing? He couldn't figure out why. He did know one thing for sure though. His parents were up to something. They were scheming, and he was somehow involved. And that frightened him.

He didn't honestly know how he was going to cope without his mate Neville. He had been parted from his best friend when he was going to need him more. He had already gotten a first taste of the animosity towards him after waiting outside the greenhouses, and he couldn't bring himself to imagine how he would react to a full Great Hall watching him when he made his reappearance later. He

instantly paled and resolved to take all his meals in the kitchens from that moment on, at least until everything calmed down a bit. If the other Hufflepuffs or the twins wanted to join him they were welcome to.

He took a look at his wristwatch and saw that he still had time until lunchtime, so he decided to write a letter to Sirius and another to Neville explaining that he was all right now and that things here at Hogwarts were looking bad with the press after his guts. He lost track of time while doing so, but thankfully, after not eating for three days straight, his stomach protested loudly and Harry realized that it was time for lunch. Luckily he was already finished so he placed them in separate envelopes and stored them safely in his pockets. He would go to send these after he got lunch.

He started making his way down to the kitchens a few minutes after lunch started so he wouldn't meet as many people. He tried to ignore any students he saw, while they looked at him fearfully and some ended abruptly their conversations and walked out of his way. At last he arrived outside the portrait with the bowl filled with fruit and he tickled the pear absentmindedly. He entered the kitchens lost in bitter thoughts when he realized that he was not alone. At one of the tables two identical redheads were sitting and bickering.

"What are you guys doing here?" he asked. The twins looked up at him.

"What do you think we're doing?" asked Fred in return with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, this being the kitchens I'd say having lunch but I can't see any food. But I'd say that knowing you," he said gesturing at the Weasleys, "I'd bet that you're up to something." he replied.

"You wound us Harry!" Fred said taking a hand to his chest and bending over comically.

"We were merely waiting for you." George replied with his characteristic happiness.

"What for?" Harry asked, still feeling depressed and angry.

"We merely wanted to share a meal with the first Hufflepuff Dark Lord ever." said the twins cheerfully. One of them had started the sentence and the other one finished it. Harry couldn't figure out who was who. Their antics amused him slightly and a hint of a smile appeared on his face. Only the twins could cheer someone up using the same reason that was depressing him.

"Yeah, sorry guys. I'm feeling a bit down that's all." he apologized.

"We know mate. Nothing to worry about. Oh, we have just the right thing to cheer you up!" said Fred suddenly. "George?"

"Here you go." said the other twin after placing a small box filled with sweets in the table. Harry didn't take one. He eyed them suspiciously instead.

"I'm seriously not in the mood for this right now. What's in them?" he demanded. The twins looked at each other.

"He can't possibly think..." started one of them.

"Yes brother dearest, I think he does."

"I know better than to accept sweets from you two, so out with it." Harry told them ignoring their mock indignant looks.

"He thinks we would prank him?" one of the Weasleys said, continuing with the dramatics.

"After all these years of... trust, and.... and frien-"

"Guys, cut it off. Come on, they're spiked right?" Harry said. The twins looked at each other again and their comical looks fell. They faced Harry with a serious look.

"Yes they are." they admitted. "But they're harmless."

"They are a counter prank." supplied George proudly.

"A counter prank?" asked Harry with a raised eyebrow.

"For tomorrow morning, our major prank."

"Those sweets will allow you to enjoy it fully."

"How?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait and see."

"Ok." he said fingering one. He looked up back at them. "Make sure Hannah Abbott and her friends get one of these each."

"Aye Sir!" one of them saluted him.

Harry begged the pranksters to tell them how the prank would be like. They didn't speak a word other than assuring him he would love it and it would take place tomorrow morning at the Great Hall. Harry wasn't too comfortable with that, but if the twins promised amusement, then they meant it. Screw the people at the Great Hall at the time. Harry wasn't about to miss it.

"Hey guys, while I was unconscious, did any letters arrive for me?" asked Harry once the House Elves had laid a copious feast in front of them.

"You're talking about Neville, right?" asked Fred.

"Yes, and Padfoot. Has he sent any letters?"

"No." one of them replied.

"No?" he asked confused, looking around at the other people. He would surely have written by now. "Not even to you guys?"

"Nope." said Fred shaking his head. "If he has, his letters haven't got here."

"That's weird." Harry observed.

"That it is, my friend. When you were at the Hospital Wing at the end of last year he came to visit you every single day, waiting for you to get better." said George. "I would have expected him to have written to you at the very least in the event he couldn't make it."

"Or to one of us instead at least." added Fred. "If he can't get through to you it's only logical to write some other friend of yours."

"Maybe it's because of my parents. Things between them and Sirius have escalated even more as of late. Anyway, I've already written to him. When we're done here I'll go to the Owlery and send Hedwig. Hopefully he'll get a hint and right back."

"Hopefully." George agreed.

After that, the three of them enjoyed a copious and customized meal prepared by the House Elves until the school bell rang signaling that students only had ten minutes until their classes started. Harry made good use of the fact that he had been excused from his classes today to skip Charms, if only to spite his mother.

Then it would be time for Harry to face Hogwarts' population again. He would head down to Care of Magical Creatures with his housemates. That class would be with Slytherin's which seemed more amused than bothered with Harry's supposed darkness. This way he managed to avoid the Gryffindor's insults and taunts, and whatever reproachful, or hateful, or disgusted looks Riley sent his way had his class been with the Ravenclaws.

.o0o.

Lily Potter found her husband at the Staff table of the Great Hall during lunch. As always he was seated right next to Dumbledore. She took the seat next to James and thankfully with no-one sitting right next to her at the other side. She had news to share with her husband and the Headmaster. Both of them stopped eating and looked at her expectantly as she started serving herself some food. News from Harry's recovery had already traveled through the school.

"So how's Harry?" James asked not being able to wait. "Is it true he's awake?"

"Yes. He woke up this morning." Lily said as she poured some pumpkin juice into her goblet.

"That's magnificent news Lily." Dumbledore said with a small smile.

"And why I am just being informed of this? You could have told me." James said annoyed. Dumbledore and Lily shared guilty looks.

"You also knew?" James asked Dumbledore, being even more annoyed for not being kept in the loop. "So how mad was he? Does he know what really happened?"

"No." said Lily putting down her fork. "He has temporary amnesia. He doesn't remember a single thing before the moment he was stunned."

"What did you tell him?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, when he asked, I told him the story we agreed on and that has been going on around the school and the Prophet. Karl found him there, called for help and when you were healing him when Longbottom interfered."

"Do you think he believed you?" Dumbledore asked.

"He looked really confused after I told him. I can't really know if he did."

"I really hope he believes it." James said.

"Indeed." Dumbledore agreed. "Proving to him that you're still there for him and that you love him will go to great lengths to bring him back."

"I'm still not comfortable with this." Lily said.

"What are you talking about?" James asked.

"It's only that I don't like my son being named the Dark Lord of the future because of some story we came up with so Karl and the both of you were protected."

"Lily, you know that we decided to do that for more reasons than our own reputation." Dumbledore said. "We know for a fact what path your son has chosen to take. He has gone Dark and there's no denying it. I saw the immense darkness of his Aura. By having the Prophet suggest he's dark it will make him see what he risks losing if he continues down that path. People are already starting to turn his back on him. It is my belief that this is in the best interests for the future of your son."

Just then a single owl came flying through the big double doors of the Great Hall. The bird made a bee-line towards the Staff Table. Everyone present observed with anticipation, eager to see to whom it was directed. When owls showed up every morning it was a normal affair in which everyone knew better than to try to spot their own owl between the multitude of birds flying around. It was better to carry on with your breakfast and wait until it landed beside you. However, when a single owl appeared at unusual times, everyone followed it with its gaze, curious to see to whom it was addressed.

In this case, the owl landed in front of Dumbledore. The Headmaster took the letter as everyone went back to their meals. The owl flew off as soon as it was free from its burden. Dumbledore frowned worriedly at the letter as he saw the Hogwarts crest on the seal. He quickly tore it open with a bit of unease. A Hogwarts letter addressed to him only could mean one thing: The Board of Governors.

"Oh, dear." he mused out aloud as he read it.

"What's the matter?" James asked between gulps from his pumpkin juice.

"The Board of Governors has somehow found out." Dumbledore said, his eyes not leaving the letter.

"Found out about what?" James asked turning white. He felt he already knew the answer.

"About everything."

"What do you mean by everything?" Lily asked.

"They know that Harry didn't mess up with a spell. They are summoning us to a hearing to establish what really happened."

"Us?"

"James and I." Dumbledore replied gravely.

.oOo.

The Care of Magical Creatures class that afternoon, turned out to be pretty awkward and nothing like Harry had expected it to be. Hagrid showing off some of his most strange and dangerous animals was the only thing that remained unchanged throughout the class.

For starters the half-giant behavior had changed. Harry and Neville had liked the huge man since they had first met him due to his kindness and amiability, so when he seemed a bit uncomfortable when Harry had greeted him before the class started, Harry felt heartbroken. He thought that the half giant would understand, having been in the same position as he and Neville were now. He was wrong. Hagrid was a devoted follower of Dumbledore and the Light. The Headmaster had helped him out after he was expelled from the school and now he had his unwavering loyalty. He hated anything Dark passionately, and took any attacks on Dumbledore, verbal or magical or physical, like an attack on himself.

On the contrary, the Slytherins seemed to be quite indifferent about it all, although Harry could pick up on the hidden amusement of many of its members. He caught many of them watching him, although they didn't confront him, and Harry was grateful for that. That was the last thing he would need. Although he was of the belief that not all Slytherins were murderers and sociopaths, if he was seen talking to them, it would only help strengthen the ongoing rumors about him.

All this made the lesson quite dull and quiet, and Harry was grateful that the sound of a bell ringing loudly inside the castle put an end to it. Along with his housemates they strolled up to their common room where they accorded that they would meet later at the common room to head down to the kitchens for dinner. Harry had considered going to dinner in the great Hall, but he decided to wait until tomorrow. He knew that sooner or later he would have to, but at this moment he'd rather it was later.

However, fate had other plans. Half an hour before dinner Ernie came up to their room and asked Harry to come out to the common room. Harry asked why but the other boy had already left. He tried to cry after him but he received no reply. Annoyed, he dropped his potions book in his trunk and took off after the other Hufflepuff. He caught up with him at the bottom of the stairs. He inquired again why he had to come down from his room. Ernie merely nudged his head



towards the common room's entrance and went to sit with the other Hufflepuffs.

There, standing at the threshold of their common room, was his mother. He didn't even bother repress his loud groan when he saw her. Her weird behavior hadn't faltered yet, which made it be even weirder. She was looking at him with a small smile, the way she had at the Hospital Wing a few hours ago when he had woken up after many days of sleep and rest. Knowing she hadn't been there at the time of the attack, yet knowing she was deeply involved, he gave her the courtesy of a smile while he approached her, if only to keep the appearances while he played along in hope to find out what his family was up to. In Karl and his father's case, he had a mind to give them courtesy of his fists, especially Karl, if he ever dared to approach him again.

"Hi darling, are you feeling any better? You didn't show up for my class." she told him with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"I thought you said I was excused from classes today." he replied.

"Yet Hagrid told me that you showed up for his class." she countered.

Harry couldn't come up with a good enough excuse, or he didn't even bother to, so he simply shrugged. His mother's lips stretched in a thin line and looked a bit exasperated.

"Your father and I noticed you had lunch with the elves today." she told him.

"So?" Harry asked.

"You know how I feel about House Elves. You shouldn't burden them with even more workload."

"Why not? They are happy, no thrilled, to do so." Harry told her in a nonchalant fashion. She knew this was a touchy subject for his mother. She had even helped Granger with that ridiculous 'spew' thing.

"Be that as it may, it is against the school rules to enter the kitchens." Lily replied getting a bit irritated.

"Never told off your son for doing so." Harry countered.

"That's because we know for certain that he won't spend every meal there. Everyone has a meal or two at the kitchens sometime throughout their years at Hogwarts, but they don't have every single meal there."

"And who says I do?"

"Harry, after what the Prophet said about you we understand that you wish to avoid the stares and whispers at the Great Hall. But you'll have to face them eventually."

"I've already faced them!" he barked at her. "I faced them this morning when I went to class without any previous warning whatsoever about the lies the Prophet had printed about me! You didn't warn me that you had my best friend expelled from school either! If you were truly worried about my reaction to other people's opinion you would have warned me then! So don't act like you care... because you don't. You never have..." Harry finished with a sad expression.

"Had I known you were going to class I would have. I thought you might want to hear it from your friends." she explained in what was a lame excuse.

"What friends mother?" he hissed coldly. "Neville's been expelled." I suppose I should thank you for that. Don't expect me to think your or my dear father had nothing to do with it.

"Come on Harry, you surely have more friends than him." she answered.

"Other friends?" Harry shook his head and laughed bitterly. "During my entire life any person that could've become my friend was bullied away by Karl and his friends. And now, the only one with the balls to ignore them and befriend me is gone. So tell me, mother, what friends do I have left to turn to?"

That rendered her speechless. She opened her mouth a couple of times but no words came out. She gathered what dignity she had left

and left, not without instructing him to stop having meals at the kitchens.

.o0o.

Rita Skeeter made her way through the Wizarding Village of Hogsmeade towards the Hog's Head, a dingy pub that attracted all kind of queer strangers. It was well past dinner time and the sun had already taken its leave from this side of the earth. The blonde reporter idly wondered what this would be about as she wandered through the frozen streets. Though it certainly wasn't the first time she had been asked to come to a certain location to get a story, it was the first time a Lord of a great family had summoned her. It was kind of disappointing that the meeting would be taking place at such a murky joint. She had always pictured a reunion like this in a fancy old manor of old, where they would discuss an article over a costly brand of Firewhiskey.

The battered wooden sign hung from a rusty bracket over the door, creaked in the chilly wind as she approached. She pushed the heavy door open and had difficulty in closing it with a loud thump. Everyone looked up for a second, as if annoyed for getting interrupted in their conversations or perhaps because of the gust of freezing wind that she had let some inside.

Rita Skeeter ignored the irritated looks directed her way. Her eyes travelled around the single, small and dirty room that the Hog's Head comprised. It didn't take her much to spot Sirius Black sitting at a small table at the far end of the room. In a place packed with so many funny folk, it was easy to single him out as he was the only normal-looking person in the whole pub.

She crossed the room and took the sit across him without asking for his permission. Sirius regarded her with a blank expression as she did so. The Barman approached her and asked her if she wished anything to drink. She was about to say no when Sirius spoke up.

"Go ahead. I'm buying." he said twirling his glass of Firewhiskey in his hand.

"All right." Rita said. "I'll have a glass of Firewhiskey then." she told the barman. When he had left he muttered a 'Thanks' to Sirius.

"So what is it that you have for me?" Rita asked.

"What I have is a substantial amount of Galleons for you in exchange for your services." he said pulling out a small paper from his pocket. She saw the Gringotts crest on it as Sirius slid it over to her. It was a cheque from Gringotts. Her eyes widened as they read the amount on it.

"That's a generous offer." she commented nervously. Such an amount of money could only mean that whatever Black wanted, there were some very serious risks for her.

"I'll give you an exclusive interview which is to be printed at the front page."

"That will be difficult." she said.

"No it won't. Not with a Potter bashing." he commented.

"Potter bashing?" she nearly hissed.

"Yes. I'll give you some information that they have tried to bury."

"No way! No! There's no way I'm doing this!" Rita answered after a little thought. What Sirius was suggesting was could very well be the end of her career. "You're mental! Nobody speaks out against the Potters. It could cost me my career."

"I am aware of that. What do you think will happen to me? Listen, you do this for me and you'll be handsomely rewarded."

"Haven't you been listening to what I said?" Rita hissed at him. "If I do this, my career is over. The public will flame me, the Potters will do much worse, like ensure I'm never hired again. So unless you-"

"Unless you don't agree to do it, I assure you your career will be over." Sirius cut in with a threatening tone. "Look, from my point of view you have two options. First, you accept my generous offer and receive another half when the job is done. Second option: You refuse me, and I go right now to the Ministry to denounce you as an unregistered Animagus." Rita Skeeter went pale.

"How did you know?"

"It doesn't matter how. What matters is that I do know. So what you say?"

"The editor at the Prophet will never agree to print it." she argued.

"I guess I'll have to bribe him too then."

"Why are you so bent on doing this?" she asked after looking at him calculatingly for a few seconds.

"They have messed with someone very close to me. And it isn't the first time. I just want to see them suffer for a while."

## Chapter 17: Neville's New Tutor

A loud knock broke the silence the house was in as well as Neville's musings. He heard her grandmother open the door and greet someone before an elf appeared in his room on Augusta's behalf that asked him to come down. He thought about bringing down with him some spare parchment as well as his quill and an ink bottle, but he decided against it when he realized that unless he carried all of his books as well, he probably would have to get back up here to collect the textbook they would be using.

He took his time in going down. He was already a little ahead of class, and as homeschooling made you learn faster as you were the only student, it wasn't important if he shortened the class time with his deliberately slow movements. When he finally got to the lobby he heard his grandmother's voice coming from the living room. She found her there sitting and having tea with a man he recognized immediately. He was very short man, a bit fat too and he had a large bald patch on his head. His pointed nose and his very small eyes made his face resemble that of a rodent. Harry had spoken to him about this man many times, and in none of them Harry had said anything good about him, quite the opposite in fact. This man was Peter Pettigrew, and Neville had no idea how on earth this man was sufficiently qualified to tutor him. According to Harry he had barely made it through his NEWTs.

"Ah Neville, let me introduce you to Mr. Pettigrew." she announced while Peter was standing up to meet him. "He went to Hogwarts with your parents, may they rest in peace, isn't that right Mr. Pettigrew?" she commented kindly.

"It is Mrs. Longbottom. I was a very good friend of your father Neville. We were as close as brothers." the rat animagus said out stretching his hand for Neville to shake.

"I doubt that very much, Wormtail." he replied icily while ignoring his hand. How dared he lie to him about his hospitalized father! Due to Harry's words he had already developed a strong dislike for the man before they had even met, but now he hated him as much as Harry did. Peter looked taken aback and dropped his hand. "Sirius Black told me and my friend Harry all about your little group of troublemakers you had at school. And I know for a fact that my father wasn't in it as he was a Ravenclaw and a year ahead of you."

"Neville, don't be so rude! It is unbecoming. You should know better than to talk back to one of the most upstanding citizens of our society. Remember he was awarded an Order of Merlin. Now, apologize before you dishonor our family name any further." Augusta berated him.

"You defend the man that tries to lie to me about my hospitalized father! And I'm the one dishonoring the Longbottom name?" he spat back angrily. Augusta and Peter seemed to be taken aback, and it was the latter who tried to calm down Neville.

"I'm sorry if I offended you boy. I only meant that I knew him at school and after it at the Order of the Phoenix." Peter said defensively.

"Yeah, whatever. By the way, weren't you supposed to show up after lunch?" Neville asked not very nicely, which earned him another scolding glare from Augusta.

"Yes. I do apologize. Something came up that needed my attention. I firecalled your grandmother. She said it was quite all right that I came for a while after dinner."

Neville looked at his grandmother who was nodding kindly to Pettigrew. Then she said:

"Come on Neville, why don't you show Mr. Pettigrew to your room?" Augusta said interrupting the uncomfortable silence that had settled in.

"Yeah, sure." he said reluctantly. "Right this way."

.oOo.

That evening Harry reluctantly followed his Housemates out of their common room en route to the Great Hall to have dinner. He had a thought about defying his parents and skipping dinner. He felt that lately he was the one in the receiving end and that he should counterattack, even if it was in the form of a childish fit. His housemates had better sense and dragged him out of his dorm. He knew they were right so he didn't complain much in the way down. He only resolved to do this with as much dignity as he could muster.

He paused for a moment outside the doors. He straightened his robes, took a large breath and walked in. His eyes looked at everyone and no-one at the same time, watching out for their reactions. For a few seconds, no-one reacted. People went on with their conversations and Harry foolishly allowed himself to think that maybe they would ignore him or that, even better, they didn't remember about him anymore.

Then someone spotted him and stopped talking, causing the people around to look in the same direction. It was a chained reaction and in no time Harry found himself being the center of attention of the Hall. No one was talking anymore. Not even the staff. More than hundred eyes were fixed on him. He stopped briefly at the sudden expectation, but a nudge of his friends made him continue to his seat. The Hufflepuffs sat around him sheltering Harry from the stares. Fred and George left their table and did the same.

Little by little the characteristic clatter of the Great Hall came back, although many people kept glancing towards him during the meal.

"Don't worry. They will forget about you sooner than you expect." Hannah told him reassuringly. "You only have to wait until the gossip shifts to something or someone else."

That helped Harry calm down a little. Hannah was right. Wizards were hypocrites. Their opinions were exceptionally shifty. You could go from Dark Lord to being a Hero in a matter of seconds. This was one of the reasons he and Neville wanted out of this decadent world once they graduated, or perhaps even sooner, once they were adults. There really was no need to complete their last year at Hogwarts. They knew they would be able to transfer to any wizarding school they chose once they became seventeen.

A while later, when the students were finishing their desserts, Dumbledore stood up and silence fell on the Great Hall again as everyone looked up to see what he had to say.

"Silence please, Silence. Thank you! It is my greatest pleasure to announce that the staff along with our Head Boy and Girl, have decided to have a Ball the day before you leave for the Christmas holidays. After the success last year's Ball had, we decided to have another one. I apologize for not warning you sooner but I'm afraid it



was a bit of a spur of the moment thing. Now, as the year before, only fourth-years and above will be allowed to attend as well as any third years who have a date with an older student. For those in third years who don't attend the Ball and the lower years, a little party will be set up in your common rooms. Of course we have added two extra Hogsmeade days tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, so you can all buy your necessary robes. Thank you."

The whispers came back the second Dumbledore finished his speech, and Harry couldn't be happier that they weren't whispering about him. The gossip had shifted somewhere else, as Hannah had foreseen. His eyes were instantly drawn to the Ravenclaw table. Riley was talking excitedly with her friends. I'll ask her out. Harry then he remembered how he had ignored him after the Herbology class. How she had averted her gaze when they had crossed paths in the hallways after Care of Magical creatures with Hagrid.

.o0o.

The next morning, a young teenager with raven black hair and emerald green eyes ran along the sands of a beautiful and deserted Caribbean beach. He didn't pay attention to the beautiful crystalline waters illuminated by a bright sun nor to the wild tropical vegetation to his right that threatened to invade the gorgeous white sand. No, his eyes were focused in the distance, but they weren't staring at anything concrete. Many thoughts floated around his mind, like Neville's and more importantly Sirius' lack of mail. The people's reaction to the news about him printed on the paper worried him too, but there was one that just wouldn't leave him alone. Riley Wilkinson.

Ever since he had been unconscious in the Hospital Wing and the Prophet had printed many lies about him, she had changed her attitude towards him. As nearly all Hogwarts had. Harry felt that he had been so close to get her to go out with him that it was painful to think about it. They had formed a friendship over the past few days and he was planning to ask her out to Hogsmeade sometime. Now, instead of smiling at him every time he saw him, her gaze would drop down and she would walk past without a single word. She seemed... frightened, or concerned maybe about what would people would say if they saw her coming up to Harry and engage the future Dark Lord in a friendly conversation. Harry could understand that, to an extent, especially after all the bull that had been printed about him.

When his thoughts drifted to Neville and Sirius a sudden feeling of loneliness engulfed him. He hadn't heard from Sirius since the day he had talked to Dumbledore at his office. Although his godfather sometimes tended to disappear to some odd countries because of his businesses, Harry knew he liked to be informed of things and therefore read the news. There was no way he wouldn't have written or contacted him in any way after all that had happened. Again, he saw Dumbledore's and his parents hand in this. He hadn't heard from Neville either since he was expelled. About an hour ago he had instinctively looked at Neville's bed while he changed into his sportswear quietly trying not to wake his dorm mates. For a moment he had expected to see him there, mirroring his own movements and getting ready for their daily workout. The equal lack of mail on Sirius's part made him think that there might be another reason for them not to write to him. He was absolutely positive that they were still his friends and therefore would write to him, yet no mail was getting to him. He wondered if his own mail was getting to them.

Finally, after a long and exhausting run he started to slow down until he was walking. Then the scenery changed dramatically into a replica of his own bathroom at the dorm, which he used to wash off all the sweat. After that he changed into his muggle clothes and exited the Room of Requirement, reluctantly making his way to the Great Hall, yet with a rush of excitement at the twins' imminent prank.

.oOo.

Neville couldn't sleep in despite being in Saturday. His workouts with Harry had made him wake up routinely very early in the morning, and no matter how hard he tried he would not be able to go back to sleep. Not being allowed into the grounds because of his Grandmother's punishment, he had to settle for an indoor workout in his room. He neglected his morning run for obvious reasons and got started doing sit-ups and push-ups before he focused in his Animagus training. He was positive that Dumbledore knew about his Animagus ability, yet he wasn't quite sure that he knew his form or if he had informed his grandmother. Imagining the fit she would throw if she discovered he was an illegal Animagus made him lock the door with any means at his disposal before he started his practice. He used the traditional lock, fitted the chair in the same manner as he had done the day he had come back home, and used the Colloportus spell to seal the door. One of the only perks about being

homeschooled was that he was allowed to do magic at home, though the home school education he was receiving by Pettigrew was so deficient that he wondered if it actually qualified as such and if he should be allowed to continue his use of magic outside from school.

Pettigrew had come by yesterday evening after Neville had finished dinner. It came as a surprise to see him show up as the Rat Animagus was supposed to come by after lunch for their first class. It bothered him to no end that his Grandmother had forgotten to tell him that she had rescheduled their class without even warning him about it with very, very, little time in advance. Neville had been planning on picking up his Animagus transformations that evening, but after Peter showed he would have to wait until the next day.

The class had started with Peter asking him how far along he was in each subject, so that he could plan a little schedule for them to follow. Neville did so, leaving out his and Harry's independent studies. Then Peter asked him to get out the book on History of Magic and start reading at a certain chapter. The young wizard could barely believe it. Pettigrew would have him read the textbook and expect an essay a few days later? He could do that on his own, he didn't need a frigging tutor for that! What bothered Neville the most though, had been that while he sat at his large study table reading about some Goblin rebellion, Peter took a tour around his room, his wand twirling between his fingers, as he observed everything curiously and calculatingly, but thankfully not touching anything.

When the class finally came to an end, Neville was too eager to show Pettigrew out of his room and check everything Peter had seemed to take an interest on. While Neville had been observing him all the time, he couldn't quite remember which objects had seemed to spike his attention and which he had completely ignored. It had been very creepy to see him inspect his room in such a way, so he decided to 'hide' everything from view, even the now bright red Remembrall beside his bed. He had frowned at it, but quickly shrugged it away.

Neville's thoughts drifted back to the present as he continued to train in his Animagus abilities. This time, after much effort and determination, he managed to finally transform his ears and nose, which was a great improvement taking into account that he hadn't

worked on it for the last few days. Perhaps Sirius was right about giving it a rest so you wouldn't become too frustrated. Neville was ecstatic and was positive that he would manage the complete transformation in a few days time. He was so thrilled that for a moment he felt as if nothing bad had happened over this few days.

He was still waiting to know if Harry had already left the Infirmary, or if he had even woken up. He had resorted to asking her grandmother to find out about his state, but she would do no such thing because of his actions against the Headmaster. He felt disconnected from the world. He wasn't allowed to leave the Manor, not even venture into its extensive grounds. Augusta had made sure of that by reconfiguring the wards. His only sources of information about what was going outside his prison were the Prophet and Sirius. And even Harry's godfather couldn't find out anything about Harry due to the legal measures. Even though the amount news that came from school was scarce, if they came at all, Neville was optimistic and was sure that Harry was all right.

After a long shower, he went down to have breakfast. When he suddenly remembered that Sirius had gone to Rita Skeeter, he ran to the kitchen. He nearly kicked a house elf that was preparing his breakfast when he entered.

"Sorry Punky." he apologized. "Where's the Prophet? And where's Grandma?"

"Mistress Augusta is out and the Prophet is in the table young Master." the House Elf supplied happily.

He picked up the paper and started scanning the front page. A satisfied expression appeared in his face shortly after his eyes settled on a photograph of Sirius with the Potters when they were young.

'LORD BLACK SPEAKS OUT AGAINST THE POTTERS!' read in big black letters that covered half of the front page. The other half page was occupied by news of yet another Death Eater attack the day before around noon. It was the seventh since the term had started. Neville shook away those thoughts and turned again to the article that interested him.

He grinned foolishly as he made his way back to his room whilst reading the Prophet.

.o0o.

Aww, sorry for the cliffie there guys. I know you wanted to see what Sirius had to say about the Potters, but I wanted that to happen with Harry reading it, not Neville. I know the chapter is a bit short. I'll be posting the next in no time. Until then I hope you enjoy it and you review... Please?

## Chapter 18: The Prank

Albus Dumbledore descended the stairs that led to his office. He paused for a moment at the bottom of the spiraled staircase and whispered a new candy-based password to the gargoyle and then he was on his way to breakfast. As every other morning, he strolled slowly towards his destination, thus allowing himself some time to ponder over the occurrences that took place in his school. It seemed that nowadays, the elder Potter twin, the 'Un-chosen One', otherwise known as Harry, happened to be always present in his thoughts.

The moment he was ruled out of the Prophecy, his interest in the boy diminished to the point that he stopped paying any special attention to him. He was just another student to him, only to spring into his mind whenever his parents brought up the subject, just as they had done a few days ago. Sadly, yet fortunately, it had led him to discover his affinity to the Dark Arts. It surprised him how well the boy had hidden his use of Dark Magic. Hogwarts was full of concealed detectors that alerted him when someone cast a dark spell within the school's walls. Dumbledore even had a list of those more prone to use the darker branches of magic, and obviously knew about those students with the Dark Mark already branded on their arms, whom which he desired to redeem. However, Harry had never been on that list, and that only helped to prove his theory that he was so deeply involved with them that he had learned to fool his detectors long ago.

He had many things already arranged to help him purify his Aura with Light though. Among them, the Ball taking place in a few days. In fact it hadn't been planned during the summer as it should have been. It had been a spur of the moment thing, and the stroke of a genius, if he may say so. He instructed the Head Boy and Girl to organize the event despite their complaints about their already loaded timetable. This was the perfect opportunity for Harry to open up and maybe get to date some girl. Ah, love, it was the purest and most powerful form of magic, and the antidote to the darkness that resided within the young man.

Dumbledore was so immersed in his own musings that he never noticed the lack of students on his way to the Great Hall.

.o0o.

Breakfast had barely started but the Great Hall was already crowded with students. The number grew by the minute. This was a rare occurrence in a Saturday, when many students sacrificed their breakfast for a longer sleep in, but the news of the arrival of the first snow of the year had traveled fast through the school. Teachers and students alike were keen to enjoy the day outdoors. However, there were a few students among them that were excited about something else. They were sitting at the end of the Hufflepuff table and waiting expectantly for their victims to arrive.

"Dumbledore should be here right... Now!" announced Fred quietly to his partners in crime. He was controlling all of their prank targets through the new edition of the Marauder's Map.

Rightly so, Dumbledore emerged from a small door beside the Head table. At first nothing looked amiss. That is until he snapped out of whatever he was thinking about and he stopped right in his tracks. He looked around the Great Hall frantically, as if looking for something he had just lost. Faint whispers and snickers started to echo around the stone walls of the Great Hall. The old wizard ignored any questions that came his way and seemed oblivious to the rest of the Hogwarts population. When Snape made to lead him back to the Head Table some force seemed to stay his hand from coming near the Headmaster. By now concerned commentaries were mixing up with heavy laughter.

"What is actually happening to him?" asked Justin between fits of laughter.

"It's what we figured his Boggart form would be." said Fred grinning widely.

"A deserted school without any people to control and manipulate." his twin brother added. Harry could now see the genius of it and was grateful that they had dragged him into the Great Hall to presence it. It wasn't the most hilarious prank they had ever pulled off but it was the one that was hurting its target most. Sure enough, the Great Hall had seen countless pranks played on unsuspecting students and teachers, who would normally laugh it off. This time, however, the prank didn't involve its target have a pleasant time. And Harry was glad that Dumbledore as well as his father were the targets.

"And to top it all of his Lemon Drops taste now of Ear Wax." George supplied making them chuckle.

"So what were yesterday's sweets for?" asked Susan.

"Oh, those are for the two Potters." one of them explained.

"Where are they?" inquired Harry.

"They are already here." said Fred signaling with his head towards the Gryffindor table.

They all turned their heads in that direction. Karl and his father were behaving as weirdly as Dumbledore, with the difference that nobody seemed to notice them. Their shouts and yells looked as if they were silenced and whenever they tried to touch someone, their hands would be repelled as equal poles of a magnet.

"And what's up with them?"

"Same as Dumbledore, Bogart effect."

"They're invisible and no-one but us can see them."

"So they don't have their public's attention anymore?" Ernie guessed.

"Correct."

"Maybe we should have included your mother too." George said as an afterthought.

"You already have. I can imagine that Karl and James missing is what she fears most." Harry commented with a satisfied smile as he watched Karl, James and Dumbledore.

The old Headmaster looked distressed and was starting to sweat profusely. He had his wand out, trying to figure if some spell had been placed in his eyes. His wand was also directed to every centimeter of the Hall. Harry thought if he may be checking if he was really alone in there. James and Karl ran around the Hall like headless chickens, from one person to the next, trying to make them see they were actually there. When someone came to close to anyone of them, James and his son were thrown backwards several



meters. They both ended up standing right next to a wall to avoid unsuspecting students and being thrown backwards because of it. For her part, Lily was trying to help Professor Dumbledore along with some other teachers and prefects. Snape had gone to fetch Madam Pomfrey a while ago.

"When will it wear off?" Justin asked.

The twins shared a look. "We don't really know." Harry looked at them with a mixture of incredulity and amusement.

"We only tested it some of the school's owls, so the length of the charm could vary on people." George explained. Harry couldn't help but laugh. This was so much like them.

"How long did it take the owls?"

"Two days."

Again, Harry couldn't help but laugh. It was going to be two good days if Dumbledore, James and Karl couldn't free themselves of the spell. Fred and George's method to be able to see his father's distressed face made it all the better.

Just then the mail arrived, carried by dozens of owls of varied sizes and colors. People stopped laughing at Dumbledore's odd behavior and focused on the incoming mail. Harry perked up as soon as he heard the owls, desperately hoping for a letter from Neville or Sirius. He felt a bit depressed when he didn't spot Sirius or Neville's owls and turned to his breakfast.

When he started to hear loud whispers emanating from anyone reading the Prophet he understood that there was some big and important piece of news. What he didn't expect was everyone's eye turning to him or Lily.

"Harry?" Susan asked tentatively.

"What is it?" Harry asked feeling slightly peeved by the stares.

"You should take a look at this." she said handing him the Prophet over the table.

He took it from her hand and immediately recognized Sirius in the front page. For a moment he feared that something had happened to him, but then he reads the front line.

'SIRIUS BLACK SPEAKS OUT AGAINST THE POTTERS' the front line read.

Harry wasted no time in reading what Sirius had to say about his parents. His eyes skipped the introductory paragraphs and immediately sought out the quoted words of his Godfather.

'The Potters never really cared all that much about Harry. All their love and attention was for the 'Boy-Who-Lived'... Fame clearly went into their heads to the point that they severed all their ties to me... Neville Longbottom tackled Albus Dumbledore to keep him from raping Harry Potter's mind... They put up a restraining order so that I couldn't contact him.'

"This can't be true..." Harry breathed. "I can't bloody believe it!" he cried as he hit the table with a closed fist. The plates and goblets gave a small jump. Some of them fall over with a loud clang, attracting the attention of more people. Harry couldn't believe it. This was just too much. His parents had outdone themselves. He found himself finding the recent prank immensely lacking in all aspects as he still tried to fully take in what he had just read. He wouldn't be able to have any type of contact with Sirius for almost two years. Surely his godfather would be already trying to solve this mess, but somehow Harry knew he wouldn't be able. Not with Dumbledore and his parents involved. Only they would be able to

He looked up at the Staff Table. Most of the staff was still trying to help Dumbledore. His mother was not. Instead she had a copy of the Prophet in her hands and was looking back at him with a very guilty expression. Harry stood up angrily, and after directing the most loathsome glare he could at his mother he left the Great Hall in a hurry, his faithful new friends following.

.oOo.

Sirius was still sleeping when the mirror started buzzing. He cursed loudly and opened the drawer of his nightstand to retrieve the vibrating mirror.

"We definitely have to agree on which hours are acceptable for you to call me." he grumbled sleepily when Neville's face had appeared on the glass.

"Aw come on. It's ten o'clock already." Neville said amusedly.

"Yes, but it's Saturday." he said stating the obvious. "On weekends ten is as early as eight in a normal week day."

Neville rolled his eyes and waved the Prophet in the mirror for Sirius to see. "I thought you would be up as soon as possible to see what Rita's piece."

"It's already out?" Sirius asked rapidly rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "I thought it would take her longer. She was concerned with the possible editing or vetoing by her boss."

"I do hope you paid her well. She very well sure earned it." Neville said sincerely. "I may not like her, but I must admit this is one excellent article. For once she has stuck to the truth and the facts."

"Well, not all of it is strictly true." Sirius admitted looking a little bit sheepish. "I added little bits here and there about our past that never happened. It's not like he doesn't deserve it."

"You don't have to apologize to me Padfoot." Neville said chuckling amusedly. "He did have it coming."

"Hopefully Harry gets the hint and doesn't try to contact me." Sirius said with a more humorless expression.

Neville nodded in agreement. "That would bring a lot of trouble."

"Aye, it would. So how are your classes going? How's your new teacher?" Sirius asked. "By the way, who is he?"

"Oh, I never told you, did I?" Neville asked lifting his eyebrow and a small smile appearing in his lips.

"No..." the dog Animagus replied, urging Neville to tell.

"Pettigrew is my tutor."

Sirius looked confused for a moment and frowned. "Pettigrew? As in Peter Charles Pettigrew?" Neville nodded. "He barely passed his own OWLS!" he exclaimed.

"That's what I told Grandmother, but she trusts Dumbledore way too much. 'If Dumbledore trusts this man it is not our place to question him.'" Neville said imitating Augusta's high pitched voice.

"So is he any good teaching?"

"You know what they say. 'If you suck at something, teach it.'"

"Is he that bad?" Sirius asked with a slight note of sadness in his voice. Peter had been his friend. He didn't know if he should consider him his friend anymore.

"He's worse."

"I see... If you like I could teach you."

"What? You're serious?" he asked. Sirius was about to crack a joke about his name but Neville didn't give him time. "How? I mean, how do I get rid of Pettigrew?"

"I'm afraid that would be most difficult."

"What are you proposing then?"

"I'm only proposing that you study by yourself the Hogwarts curriculum and whenever you get stuck we can get the mirrors and I'll correct you where I can. Don't expect me to help you with the theory bits. I'm only good with the practical side of things. Even now I can't remember, let alone understand the theory behind any of the spells."

"I don't think anyone does. We all memorize for the exams, and when that's done it leaves your mind completely."

"So how would you like me teaching you?"

"I'd appreciate it very much..." Sirius smiled and nodded. "...Professor." Neville added with a smirk. Sirius paled and his eyes went wide open.

"Aw, don't call me that!" he protested.

"Why? Are you going to dock of some points off, Professor Black?"

If objects could go through these mirrors, Neville would have been hit in the face by Sirius' pillow.

.oOo.

He was sitting in his office and back to work after what had been a queer weekend. Two days had passed since someone had played their prank on him, and for two days it had lasted. It had been very disconcerting at first to find he was completely alone in the castle. At first he had been positive he was dreaming and had done all he could think to come back to the waking life. After many failed attempts he gave in to the evident truth that someone had pranked him and was somehow unable to see the people at his school. It was about an hour after he was pranked that he saw a note writing itself in one of the walls of the Great Hall. It was Madam Pomfrey explaining what had happened to him.

The prank wore off two days later. Oddly enough it was two fully relaxing days for him, without having to worry about the people of the school and doing whatever he wished without anyone bugging him. James and his son had been pranked too. They had been made invisible and Lily Potter had gone spare. She was on the brink of alerting the Aurors when she was able to locate them and surmised they had been turned invisible.

Nobody had stepped forward and claimed the prank as his. Normally the twin Weasleys would be high on his list, but not this time. It had been a magnificent piece of magic, combining activation wards, runes and potions, far beyond the twins level of magic. Fred and George Weasley surely could not have done this. After all they had scored only three OWLs each, which was a negative record in Hogwarts' history. Only Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle were expected to do worse when the time came.

No, this prank had surely been performed by a skilled wizard. He considered many names, mainly pertaining to the post-OWL students, but none who would have a reason to prank two influential and important people such as James Potter and himself. Only a

person with motives to do it came to his mind, Harry Potter. Dumbledore knew that he was very angry at what had happened during his Legilimency exploration and its consequences. A year ago he would have dismissed the possibility of Harry's authorship for the same reason as the twins, but after discovering he had Animagus abilities and he was being consumed by dark magic, he felt inclined to think differently.

An old trinket buzzed indistinctively on one of the office's shelves, telling him that somebody was on his way up.

"Do come in." he said out loud when a second trinket warned him that it was James Potter who was standing just outside his office.

"Ah, James. I'm glad to see that you're visible at last. Those pranks were quite a piece of magic, don't you think?"

"It was an annoying piece of magic." James said sourly. "Dumbledore, whoever did this, I want him punished. Karl and I have been going crazy for two days."

"I knew a group of students once that would have found this situation to be very amusing." he told him with a twinkle in his eye.

"That group ceased to exist a very long time ago Albus." he said sorrowfully.

"Is Karl visible yet?" Dumbledore asked, not wanting to engage in a discussion about possible punishments. He was never that type of man. He only punished his students in the most extraordinary cases.

"Yes. Madam Pomfrey couldn't find a counter spell or remedy for it. We had to wait for it to wear off. The woman confined us to the Hospital Wing so nobody would run into us."

"You know her, she likes to keep her patients under her watchful eye 24/7." he chuckled.

"Except that this time, her watchful eye could not see us."

"So why have you come? What is it you want?"

"It's about Harry."

"Ah, I thought it might be." Dumbledore cut him. "Lily has already told me about the article on the Prophet. It was a rash move on Sirius' part."

"Unfortunately it wasn't considered a breach of the restraining order despite alerting Harry of its existence."

"I assume he didn't take it too well."

"No, he did not. When everybody was still looking for us, Karl and I were in my quarters, as was Lily. She looked positively worried. She was even about to alert the Aurors I think. We were trying to get her attention somehow when the door opens loudly and we see Harry standing there. He started yelling at us."

"I'm sorry James. At 'us'?"

"Yes! Somehow he could also see me and Karl."

"I thought he must have been somehow involved in the prank." Dumbledore said.

"He must have if he could see us. Anyway, it was a one way row. I tried to speak up but wasn't able because of the prank. Lily was far too worried about us to put Harry in his place either, so he just stood there yelling at us. He told us how much he hated us. Then, it looked like he was going to leave, but instead he tried to reason with us. He said he would do anything we wanted if we went right then to the Ministry to void the restraining order. I think he was really desperate back then. Of course, we couldn't do that and Lily told him so. He went back to hating mode and told us he didn't want anything to do with us ever again. That hit Lily very hard. She really wants Harry to come back to the family and renounce his dark practices."

"It must have been very hard for her." Dumbledore agreed.

"Lily and I have been thinking about having a talk with him. Maybe we will apologize. Lily says that if we clear the air between us a bit, let him know that we know about his dealings with the dark arts, that we're here for him and that we'll be watching him it might be easier for him."

"I think that's a great idea James. Let him know that you care for him and that all this about Sirius was for his best interests. Many good wizards have gone to waste when in a difficult situation they had no-one to turn to, and immersed in grief, agony, anger, hate, they were lured by dark magic."

"That's the problem Albus. Lily doesn't want to believe it, but Harry hates us since Longbottom was expelled. He blames us and he hasn't stopped writing to him ever since he woke up. At the present time he won't turn to us, not as long as he and Longbottom are friends and holds us accountable for it. And now that he has found out about Black..."

"We can't do anything about Black. It's out in the open and we must deal with it to the best of our abilities. We could, however, make sure that he doesn't find out that you have been keeping him from contacting his best friend. I fear that in Harry's mind that could be the ultimate provocation from you, making him embrace Dark Magic as he has never before."

"So what do you suggest we do?" he asked the old wizard.

"I spoke to Augusta yesterday and she seems to be thinking in the same lines as you. She doesn't want her grandson being friends with a dark wizard. Apparently, young Longbottom hasn't given hope on Harry and neither has he in return. I think we could speed up things a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Neville and Harry are two stubborn students. It is possible that they could find a way to communicate with each other if we kept them apart too long. We have to effectively put a stop to their friendship, but it would be ideal if they were to end their friendship on their own terms and personally thinking they are doing the right thing. Then you would be in the optimal position to soothe him."

"What exactly are you proposing Dumbledore?"



## Chapter 19: The Board

"Hey Harry!" Justin greeted him just as he sat in the chair opposite him.

Justin had finally found Harry in the deserted library, where he had spent the last two days catching up with his homework. It helped him to have so much to catch up. It kept him from thinking too much about the situation. After reading what the Prophet had said about the restraining order on Saturday, Harry had gone on research mode. He found out that he could not, and in fact should not, try to contact Sirius. If he did, his godfather could get in really serious trouble. Letting him know about what his parents had done through the Prophet had been a very clever move on his part. Now, if he only knew why Neville wasn't contacting him either. 'It must have something to do with my damn parents too.' Harry had thought. 'Neville wouldn't abandon me like that for no reason.'

It was Monday now, and classes had already stopped and wouldn't be starting again until after the break. Harry had been here all morning and he had started being fed up with it a long time ago.

"Hello Justin." Harry greeted the other Hufflepuff tiredly. He dropped his quill and rubbed his temples. "What are you doing here?" he asked him. He was working on a Charms essay his mother had instructed him to deliver before the holidays.

"We've been all looking for you."

"Why? Has something happened?" he asked alarmed. Since he had been cravenly by Karl attacked he had been a bit on edge.

"No, nothing like that. It's only that we and the Weasleys are going to get a table for ourselves at the Ball. Sprout came by the common room and told us we could put down our names on a list if we wanted to sit together. We wondered who you're going with so we can put down her name too."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm not going." Harry said dismissively.

"What? What do you mean you're not going?" he asked dumbfounded.

"You heard me. I'm not going. I'm not in the mood, and it isn't as if I have a date anyway."

"That's too bad for you then. The Weasley twins plan to drag you to the Great Hall in the event you refuse to go. Might as well do it with some dignity. Come on, you have a day to find yourself a date."

Harry sighed dejectedly. He really didn't want to go with anyone that was not Riley. "Well it's a bit too late now. The girl I wanted to go with isn't talking to me since the mind raping fiasco. Besides, she'll surely be taken by now." Harry grumbled bitterly and Justin nodded in understanding.

"I have an idea. Why don't you take Hannah?" he asked after thinking for a moment.

"Hannah?" Harry repeated incredulously. "Neville would kill me if I took her. And why aren't you taking her? I thought you fancied her too."

"I've already asked a fourth year. And I think Neville would prefer that you went with her rather than the lousy seventh year who's been asking her for the last two days."

"Why isn't she going with him?"

"She won't tell us, but I think it's because she misses Neville other than the fact that the guy isn't what you would call good looking. Even I, who like girls, can point that out."

"They would have surely gone together if Neville was here. He was planning on asking her out whenever he had the chance." Harry observed quietly.

"I'll write your names down then." he said getting up and giving him a pat on the shoulder.

"What if she says no?" he called after him when he was nearing the library's entrance.

"She won't." he told him convincingly. "There's so little time left that most people have already arranged their dates. I think it's probably between you and that seventh year at this point."

After Justin left, Harry felt a twinge of nervousness in his stomach. Five minutes ago he was positive that he would spend tomorrow night somewhere other than the Great Hall, the furthest the better actually. Now he knew that if Fred and George wanted him to be there at the Ball with them, there would be no way he could stay away. Whatever troubles he had about asking his best friend's future girlfriend to the dance while he wasn't here, vanished at the prospect of going alone to the dance. He couldn't give Karl the satisfaction. He would not be the laughing stock of the Ball! He had to find Hannah and ask her before she accepted that seventh year halfwit out of desperation.

He rapidly gathered his books and tossed them chaotically into his bag along with his quill, inkpot and parchment. Madam Pince looked at him sternly when he hurried out of the library and his footsteps echoed too loudly in her domain. He produced the Map out of an inner pocket of his robes and tracked Justin down. It was faster to find him than find Hannah given he already had an idea where he would be. He only had to catch up with him, who was on his way to meet the Puffs. Then he would be able to ask her.

.o0o.

Traditionally, meetings of the Board of Governors were held within the school. Its panel was constituted only by former students of the school. To make sure there was no prejudice against any of the four Houses, the Founders had deemed necessary that the Board was spilt into Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin, each House having two Governors. A position of leadership did not exist within them. They were all deemed equals and would come to their decisions through debate and vote. One of them though, normally the Governor with more years within the Board would act as spokesperson, mouthing whatever decision the Governors had arrived to.

Albus Dumbledore regarded carefully the men and women seated at the large table. They were five Governors already present, though three more should arrive shortly. One was from Gryffindor and coincidentally, the spokesman. He and Dumbledore had been young men together. The Headmaster was depositing in his lifetime friend most of his hopes that he and James could come out unscathed of this mess. The second Governor that was missing was one of the

Ravenclaw Governors, a good friend from Dumbledore too. The third one was a Slytherin, Lucius Malfoy.

This was the main reason behind his current state of unease. The tardiness of three members of the Board would not usually unsettle him, but he couldn't help thinking about the coincidence that two of them were his two fiercest supporters among the Board, and the other one, his fiercest opponent.

About five minutes later, Dumbledore discovered his fears were not without foundation when the fireplace at the end of the room flared with green flames and Lucius Malfoy came in, alone. He briefly apologized for his tardiness, but everybody understood that he was just arriving fashionably late. Purebloods, with the Malfoys as the prime example, still cared about such trivial things.

Malfoy took the head of the table and put his satchel at his side. From it he drew a series of papers which he laid in front of him.

"So let us be started." the blonde said. "This-"

"Excuse me." Dumbledore said cutting him off with a polite voice. "I believe that we are two Governors short, and that you aren't the spokesman."

"I know. I will be filling in as spokesman today due to Mr. Winters' absence. Ravenclaw Governor Mr. Nixon won't be in attendance either." he said waving it off. He turned back to his papers when Dumbledore spoke again.

"Isn't it required that all Governors are present for a formal meeting."

"Headmaster Dumbledore, this is but a formality to ask you some questions about what happened with Mr. Harry Potter. After that, in a meeting with all members in attendance, it will be decided if you should continue to hold your current position within this school."

Dumbledore knew then that he was in trouble. With his two friends missing there was nobody to stop Lucius Malfoy from steering the questioning to wherever he liked. Lucius Malfoy started speaking again then.

"Professor Dumbledore, I must say that I was surprised to learn that Mr. Harry Potter was in the Hospital Wing due to an unlawful Legilimency attack you performed on him rather than having messed up with a 'really Dark' spell."

"That is just mere speculation started by Sirius Black in an irrational bout of hate against the Potters. All of what he said in the Prophet wasn't truth." Dumbledore interrupted.

"The source of our information isn't what Mr. Black said in the Daily Prophet. I must admit that it was what made us look into the matter at first. It just wouldn't do to have our current Headmaster performing illegal Legilimency on our students. No, we achieved this information through another source. A trusted one at that, I must say."

"Nevertheless, I reaffirm my earlier position and swear that I never used illegal Legilimency on Harry Potter." Dumbledore interrupted.

"You are lucky, Professor Dumbledore, that this isn't a formal trial. The use of Veritaserum is allowed there. With a single drop I would make you sing." Malfoy said with a sneer forming in his face. "Or perhaps you would be agreeable to an oath to verify your claim."

Dumbledore looked away angrily, muttering under his breath. He was clearly annoyed. Malfoy's lips curved into a knowing smirk.

"Yes. I didn't think so." the blonde said.

"My use of Legilimency on the boy wasn't illegal." Dumbledore said loudly.

"Oh, so you do admit to having entered the boy's mind."

The old wizard sighed. "I do. However, I had his parent's permission."

"Nevertheless, I am told that Mr. Potter is proficient in Occlumency and had already aborted one of your attacks."

"So?"

"So? Isn't it right that by law when a minor is capable of defending himself against such an attack, only he, and not his parents or any other paternal figure, can consent to obtrusive Legilimency? Professor Dumbledore... I thought you had written most of our laws."

"I have. I remember writing that one very well. I do recall that the probe will only be considered illegal if the subject defends himself against said probe, regardless of any earlier proficiency of the subject against any other Legilimency probes. Well, I didn't see him trying to stop the probe from happening."

Dumbledore sat back, already savoring his victory. However, when he saw Lucius Malfoy turn to another paper with a twinkle in his eyes, the old wizard understood that this wasn't done yet.

"No. But he wouldn't be able, would he?" the Slytherin said. "Wasn't he stunned by Professor Potter's other son so you could access your mind? According to my source, young Harry was stunned by his brother Karl. Tell me, did James Potter agree to this too? Or did he personally tell his son to do it?"

Once again, Dumbledore chose to remain silent.

"Very well, I'll take that silence as a yes then. Now, if all members are in agreement we will postpone until tomorrow when we will deliberate to reach our decision."

Slowly every member of the Board agreed and the meeting was over. Dumbledore stood up rapidly and headed towards the door. As soon as he arrived back at his Office he was going to fire call his friend Mr. Winters and make sure he would vouch for him. He couldn't lose Hogwarts under any circumstance.

.oOo.

It was a great relief for Harry when he asked Hannah to the Ball and she said yes. She was not his ideal date, nor he was hers, but at least they wouldn't be going alone, and Harry wouldn't become Karl's laughing stock. He had vowed to himself to apologize to Neville about taking her whenever he came in contact with him again. For Hannah it had been a relief too. Harry had come just as that seventh year was approaching her, again, for the umpteenth

time in the last few days. It seemed that they guy was too dumb and couldn't take a hint, not even when he had been turned down no less than six times! All this had been just after lunch, which Harry had willingly skipped. He disliked the Great Hall, he disliked having Dumbledore's and his parent's eyes constantly fixed on him and looking at him as if he was suddenly going to explode. He had skipped two meals since the prank. His parents and Dumbledore were dealing with the small chaos it had provoked and hadn't noticed. Now that they were back to normal Harry was sure they would surely notice and confront him about it. He had rehearsed and excuse for that eventuality, which was being in the Library catching up with his homework and not having time to have lunch. Now he had grabbed a bite from the House elves and was on his way to the Room, where he had been practicing his Animagus whenever he could find a little spare time.

"All right Harry?" George asked patting him on the back. The twins had come out of the blue.

"Yeah." he replied. "A bit tired. Been in the Library all morning."

"You wait 'til seventh year." George told him.

"Got a date yet?" Fred asked him.

"Yes, I do. I just asked Hannah. I hope Neville doesn't mind. It's not as if I fancy her, we're only going as friends. What about you guys? Who are you taking?"

"I'm taking Angelina." Fred announced.

"And I'm taking Katie Bell. Although we might swap through the night."

Harry laughed. "Just for the fun of it right? You really think they won't notice?"

"Angelina did not last year. It was only for a little while though."

"Don't come to me for help if they catch you and try to hex your butts." Harry told them amusedly.

"Always the one to protect us innocents, right Harry?" George teased him. "Anyway, we were wondering if we could borrow the Map?"

"Sure, any pranks I should know about?" he asked them handing over the piece of parchment.

"No, not at all. We only wanted to sneak out to Hogsmeade tonight."

"Why didn't you go yesterday, or on Saturday? We did have a Hogsmeade weekend you know."

"Hogsmeade is too crowded on such occasions. We prefer to go about our business when it's calmer."

"And when there are not so many prying eyes, am I right?"

The twins smiled but said nothing.

"Any news from our friend?" Fred asked him in a more serious tone.

"No. But I've been thinking you know."

"Wow!" One of them said.

"That's news to us brother!"

"Hey!" Harry protested. "As I've said, I've been thinking about it. Maybe there is something blocking my mail. Or someone."

"Like your parents?"

"Exactly. Or it could also be Dumbledore."

"Why would he do that?"

"Why would he expel Neville? Why would he put up a restraining order between me and Sirius?"

"Point taken. So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I have to find out if there is indeed something blocking my mail or I'm just coming up with wild conspiracy



theories." He thought for a moment. Then his eyes lit up. He had an idea. "Guys, what do you know about tracking Charms?"

.o0o.

As soon as the meeting with the Board of Governors was over, Lucius Malfoy went directly to the dungeons to find his son. He headed for Snape's Office where he found him cataloguing different potion ingredients. Having a higher rank within the Death Eaters and higher position in Wizarding Society, Lucius almost ordered Snape to go find his son and bring him to the Slytherin Head Office. While he was gone, Lucius couldn't help but think back to the questioning of Dumbledore and feel victorious. Although he knew he would not manage to get him sacked, he had enjoyed humiliating him in front of the Board.

The door opened with a loud and long creak. Snape entered and after him followed young Draco.

"Draco." he called from the corner when his son entered escorted by Snape. The young Slytherin turned to look at his father with evident surprise. "Severus, give us the room please?"

The Potions Master looked at both of them and gave the faintest nod before retreating out of his office. Lucius walked to the door and cast a silencing charm. Then he turned to his son.

"Father. I am glad to see you." Draco said as he stretched his father's hand.

"It is good to see you too. Come sit down." he instructed his son as he pulled out a chair. "How have you been son?"

"I've been fine. Watching Potter as you asked."

"The Dark Lord is satisfied with your reports about him. Has he given you any trouble?"

"Not at all. He's so caught up with fighting with his family that he's pretty much oblivious to anything else. I'm sure he doesn't have a clue that we watch his every step."

"We?" Lucius asked raising an eyebrow.

"Crabbe, Goyle and I." the teenager said. His father sighed deeply and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Draco, using those imbeciles so you can keep your hands clean is all right, but do realize that you're working directly for the Dark Lord now. He does not take kindly to failure. It is an important mission he has tasked you with and you should not risk your chances of success by using people who are barely smarter than a troll. You still want to take the Mark don't you?"

"Of course I do, Father!"

"Then heed my advice, get rid of those idiots and do your job."

"I will. I'm sorry Father. From now on, I will follow Potter personally."

"Good. Now, tell me about the relationship with his parents. You said they fight frequently. Has it been always like that?"

"No. Harry only argued and fought with Karl Potter and his band of Gryffindors. The relationship with his parents was based on ignoring them to the best of his abilities. All this mess about the Legilimency attack and the restraining order just made things escalate. I hear there have been pretty heated arguments between them recently."

"That's good. What about his friends?"

"Well, Longbottom was his best friend, but he got expelled. Now he hangs out with the other Hufflepuffs mostly, and in occasion, those Weasley twins. They are not as close as he was with Longbottom though." Draco explained. He remained quiet and thoughtful for a second before he addressed his father again.

"Father, why is this all about Harry Potter so important? Shouldn't we be worrying about his brother instead?"

"No! The Dark Lord instructed you to worry about Harry and not Karl Potter. And that's precisely what you will do."

"Do you have any idea of the reasons behind this?"

"Draco, it is not my job to question his orders and strategies. If you do well enough, you'll have the chance to fight under his command and learn that he does not like to be questioned."

"But you must have an idea!" Draco objected. "Father, do not interpret my questions as a sign of apathy. I don't intend to cast doubt upon the Dark Lord's orders. I only want to understand them so I can serve him better."

Lucius looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "I understand your concerns Draco. I must confess that I have also thought briefly about the matter. When I informed him about the mysterious letter you had received containing the information, the Dark Lord, aside from asking me to do my best to upset Dumbledore's position within the school and the Board of Governors, he wanted me to make sure that the Longbottom boy wasn't pardoned and brought back to school. I believe that the Dark Lord wants Harry Potter to be as isolated as possible because he wants to recruit him."

Draco nodded in understanding. "The worse the relationship he has with his parents the more chance we have."

"Indeed. Can you imagine what a blow it would be to Dumbledore's side? I can imagine the papers: 'The twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived joins You-Know-Who.'" he said with a sneer.

"You think I should approach him?" Draco asked.

"No. Not yet. Not until the Dark Lord commands you. But do start making preparations for the event so that you aren't caught offhand. Swiftiness is a virtue that He values among his followers."

.o0o.

THERE YOU GO! ANOTHER CHAPTER UP. AGAIN, SORRY FOR NOT POSTING EARLIER. IT'S BEEN ALMOST TWO WEEKS SINCE THE LAST UPDATE AND I PROMISE THAT I'M BACK TO UPDATING ONCE A WEEK.

HOPE YOU LIKED IT. FEEL FREE TO LEAVE A REVIEW!

## Chapter 20: Getting Ready

It was Tuesday now. Finally the day of the Yule Ball had come, although it wasn't quite a real 'Yule' Ball as they were holding it a few days before Christmas. The castle and its inhabitants seemed to be livelier than ever. Everyone was excited about the impending Ball. Most girls could be heard talking about what they would wear or what they were going to do to their hair, in between continuous squealing. For the last few days this had been the most discussed topic, after Harry's rumors about his alleged darkness had died down a little bit. With luck, no one would remember about it after the holidays. Or so Harry foolishly hoped.

The boys, on the other hand, were not as excited. Surely the worst moment had passed, when you asked the girl you fancied to go with you as your date, but then came the dancing problem. A very small portion of the Hogwarts male population knew how to dance properly. Fortunately for Harry, he was amongst them. Harry had learnt how to dance the year before. Riley had taught him at the TriWizard Tournament traditional Yule Ball. So Harry didn't have that feeling of dread that kept many wondering if they would do a fool of themselves in front of the girl they fancied. That was another problem he didn't have, as his partner was already spoken for and he really didn't like her in that way. Besides, Neville would have his head if he tried something.

The Hogwarts ghosts were excited too. An unexpected and important event as this was a welcome change in their monotonous and mostly boring... err lives? They could be heard complaining passionately about the inconvenience of wearing to the Ball the clothes they had died with, as they couldn't possibly change into other ones. This wasn't a problem for ghosts who had died wearing acceptable clothes, such as Hufflepuff's and Gryffindor's resident ghosts, Nearly Headless Nick and the Fat Friar. It was for Slytherin's ghost however. He wasn't called the Bloody Baron for nothing. His clothes were stained not only with his own blood from his self inflicted stab wound on his torso, but also Helena Ravenclaw's, daughter to one of the founders of the school. She was now known as the Grey Lady, Ravenclaw's ghost.

That morning Lily Potter glanced at the Hogwarts grounds repeatedly from her window while she marked some end of term exams which had only ended yesterday. Fifth and seventh year

were excused from these as they would be taking OWLs and NEWTs and the end of the year. Many students littered the school grounds after having finally finished their end of term exams. They were engaged in all type of winter-like activities. Some spent their time making snowmen and customizing them with many types of charms. Others, Muggleborns by the looks of it, had conjured skis and were teaching ignorant purebloods how to use them. However, the most favored activity still was, and had been since always, the snowball fight. It was a sort of unofficial tradition at the school, were many students would have a huge snowball fight, the teams being determined by the Hogwarts houses.

The continuous yells and laughter from the students made her look every now and again with a nostalgic feeling at them, remembering the years she had spent playing at the snow with her class-mates.

One of the many times her attention drifted to the carefree students he noticed three figures walking along the battlements near the Owlery, which could be found at a defensive tower where two outer walls came at an angle. Two of these figures were clearly the infamous Weasley twins, yet she couldn't recognize the shorter boy that walked alongside them. He seemed familiar and after having a closer look with her omnioculars she recognized her son. The older one, Harry. She watched him stroke the feathers of his beautiful snowy owl, Herbert, was it? Oh she couldn't remember. From the way he walked she could tell he wasn't especially happy or even excited about the approaching winter holidays. She felt sorry for him when she remembered that his best friend had been expelled and that the letters her son was sending him would never reach him. Dumbledore had made sure of that with the consent of both the Potter and Longbottom families. It was a cruel thing to do, but as Albus had told them, it was for the greater good.

.o0o.

After the twins had assured him the previous evening that they had covered tracking charms in their sixth year, they had agreed to meet after breakfast to help him proceed with his plan. The meeting point they had established was the front courtyard just outside the Entrance Hall.

During breakfast, Harry kept glancing at the Gryffindor table while Hannah and Susan kept going on and on about the Ball, and kept

trying to drag the males into the conversation. They were wondering who would be taking who, who would show up without a date (Crabbe and Goyle were the frontrunners for this one), which girl would be wearing the most beautiful dress, which guy would look the most handsome in his dress robes, who would make the cutest couple, who would get together that night... Justin and Ernie looked as if they were going to fall asleep. Only their hands kept their heads falling into their breakfast. It looked like History period with Binns all over again.

As soon as Harry saw Fred and George leave their seats he drank the last of his pumpkin juice in a single gulp, excused himself from his friends and followed them on their way out. When he was about to step out into the courtyard he found himself face to face with a group of Gryffindors, Karl's Gryffindors to be precise. Before him were his brother along with Ron Weasley, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas. They all had at least one hand in their pockets, surely ready to withdraw their wands, if they didn't have them out already, like that bloody idiot, Ron Weasley. How he could have inherited so little brains compared to what his twin brothers had, he could never understand. Harry had his own wand in a holster in his right forearm, ready to be withdrawn in a fraction of a second. His brother Karl stepped out of his little group, his wand gripped inside one of his pockets.

"Well, well, if it isn't my brother, gone to the dark side." Karl said walking around him with an air of superiority.

"Get lost brother, or else find yourself invisible again for the next few days and incapable to attend the Yule Ball." Harry told him defiantly. Karl visibly flinched at that and seemed surprised at Harry's new found backbone, but soon enough he regained his composure and his lips formed into a sneer.

"You know that I'm taking her to the Ball, right?" he said loudly as Harry was walking away from him. "They tell me she won't look at you in the face." he continued as Harry stopped and turned to face him with pained expression he could not manage to hide very well. "And that she was disgusted to have been friends with a dark wizard as you." he continued with a malicious smile. Harry clenched his fists ready to strike, but saw their father emerge from the Great Hall and come to a halt, looking their way as if wondering if there was

anything wrong. Harry knew he would get in loads of trouble if he did what he was itching to do right now.

"The time for glorifying yourself will very soon be at an end... brother." Harry responded silently but with a tone that chilled Karl's bones.

Karl and his goons stood there taken aback by the subtle threat Harry had made, whilst the raven haired boy continued on his way to meet the Weasleys. A sad and outrageous expression adorned his face when he reached them.

"You all right there Harry?" asked one of them with concern.

"Yeah." Harry said dismissively in barely a whisper. "Don't worry about it. It was just Karl being his usual asshole self."

The twins kept their silence until they reached the Owlery. Harry's look and the glum silence in which their concerns were received shut them up.

"Want to do the honors?" Fred asked George in a cheerily tone when they arrived at the Owlery, they wanted to get Harry to lighten up a little bit. They took a seat at the stairs that took to the upper landings of the cold and drafty tower.

"I'd be delighted to dear brother. Just hand me the textbook. Harry call down your owl so we can get down to business!" he replied in his trademark cheerful manner.

"There! Page 224, Tracking Charms." Fred told his twin as he loomed over the book's index.

Harry didn't need to call for his faithful owl as she had flown down to greet him as soon as he entered. She pecked his finger lightly and hooted what sounded like a greeting.

"What do you need that textbook for?" Harry asked them worried. "I thought you told me, and I quote 'We know everything about tracking charms' when I asked you yesterday."

"Well, we know that they track things, and we know the words also." his twin added in their defense. "We only lack the experience."

"You have never tried it before? Not even once?" Harry asked flabbergasted. "But you covered it in class last year."

"Truth is we couldn't be bothered to practice it when your mother told us to. We were busy with... some other things, right Fred?"

"You could put it that way, yes." Fred agreed.

"I'm starting to think this may not be a good idea after all." Harry told the twins as he warily glanced between Hedwig and George's wand. "Why don't you give it a try with that small rock over there first?"

Fred shrugged and walked over the straw and owl droppings to the other end of the Owlery. He grabbed the stone and tossed it to his twin, who immediately began working on it. After waving his wand over it, the stone started to glow with a bluish light. It was the sign that told you the charm had worked. Harry was impressed. Seventh year spells and charms were very complicated, and very few people could get one of them to work right in their first try. If they focused more in their studies rather than their jokes and pranks they would easily make it to the top three of their year. Harry thought. However, they were very serious about opening that joke shop of theirs. Harry had gotten Sirius to help them out once they started, economically and in terms of research and development of their jokes.

"Aha!" he celebrated. "See Harry, you had nothing to worry about."

"So how will I know Hedwig has reached Longbottom Manor?"

Fred handed him a piece of parchment. "Hedwig's location will appear on this parchment. It is currently linked to the rock. See, it reads, 'South Corner of the Owlery, Hogwarts, Scotland.'"

George grabbed the stone and walked to one of the glassless windows. "And if we throw the stone off the window and down to the lake, it should change almost immediately."

He tossed it out of the window and indeed the ink on the parchment rearranged itself to read: 'Northern Shore of the Black Lake, Hogwarts, Scotland.'



"It does work." Harry said grinning. He was a step nearer from discovering what was wrong with Neville, with the mail, or both.

"What do you say? Shall we give it a try on Hedwig?"

"Definitely, go ahead."

Hedwig was wary of wands so Harry had to soothe her while George performed the charm. The snowy owl cowered when the blue light sprang around her. Only once she had calmed down was Harry able to attach the letter he had kept in the inner pocket of his robes to her talon. He gave her some owl treats and saw her off, desperately hoping that this would help work out what was going on, to determine if something was blocking or intercepting his mail, or if it did reach Neville and for some unknown reason he was ignoring him.

.o0o.

Harry spent all that morning with the twins. His mind was too taken with thoughts of Hedwig and her safe return, hopefully with a reply, so he tried to amuse himself as much as possible so he could vanish such bitter thoughts from his already troubled mind. Fred and George were only too eager to teach a Marauder's son and godson what they called 'The Noble Arts of the Prank' when he decided to tag along.

Harry was really surprised at their ability to come up with original and elaborated pranks in the blink of an eye and their knack for thinking a pranking use for any object he could come up with. Their pranking talents had always been obvious to Harry, as they were for everyone, but they were now showing Harry the extent of their capabilities.

They had lunch together in the Great Hall and despite Harry's protests they managed to drag him to one deserted end of the Gryffindor Table. He saw his brother sneer at him when he sat there. They were immediately joined by Lee Jordan who didn't appear to have a problem with Harry. 'The friends of my friends are my friends' he said when Harry looked at him expecting the usual reaction he got from people lately. Sometime around mid afternoon, the twins and Harry were walking along the limits of the Forbidden Forest engaged in a small discussion about the twins' future business plans.

A few yards after they had gone past Hagrid's hut they were ambushed.

Four figures emerged suddenly from behind a set of bushes in the forest, with their hands raised. Harry, Fred and George reacted out of instinct and withdrew their wands from their holsters. Harry felt as if what had happened some days before when Neville was expelled was happening all over again. He suspected it may be Karl's retribution for his threat earlier that morning. He didn't want to end up in the Hospital Wing again, not having the Yule Ball and even less at his brother's wand, so he quickly aimed to the figure to his right, ready to defend himself. Just when he was about to pronounce the spell something impacted heavily against the side his face. It was something soft, wet and cold.

He blinked a few times before he could make what had happened. The laughs and cheers coming from the Forest helped too. His four Hufflepuff friends emerged from the Forest with some more snowballs firmly gripped in their gloved hands. They didn't give them much time to react as they started bombarding the three of them again. Fred and George started firing back and Harry joined soon after. It was a four on three, but Harry and the twins were more than happy to engage in the snow fight to get revenge at them for the ambush.

It was an equal fight that took them to their limits to try and outmatch the other team. Magic was allowed to create diversions, trip your opponents or help throw multiple snowballs at once. It was like a magical duel only that the offensive spells were replaced with snowballs. Tripping jinxes, silencing charms, temporary blinding charms, and many other safe spells and charms were allowed. The fifth years had a slight advantage in their numbers but it was leveled out with Fred and George's major expertise and knowledge, and Harry's magnificent Seeker reflexes.

An hour or so before the Ball started, the snowball fight was still going on. Hannah and Susan had left a long time ago to get ready. Apparently they needed a good three hours to do so, so now Harry and the Weasleys were slaughtering Justin and Ernie who didn't want to give up despite their robes being all wet. They were all panting and their cheeks had a red tint to them, the chilly temperatures turning their breaths into white smoke.

They finally decided to end it on a draw, or else they wouldn't be ready for the Ball on time. It was agreed by both parts that they would resume the fight after the Holidays.

.o0o.

It didn't take them more than half an hour. The boys from Hufflepuff had arrived to their dormitory three quarters of an hour before the Ball started, and when there were less than fifteen minutes to go, they had been down in the common room waiting for their dates for a few minutes already. The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. The males who had a date with Hufflepuffs patiently waited for their dates. Every time a girl descended she was normally greeted with his date's flabbergasted expression and some whistles from the crowd. It was pretty embarrassing for the first couples but it became better as the common room was slowly emptied.

Justin was anxious to get to the Entrance Hall where he would meet his date provided that he wasn't allowed to go into the Ravenclaw common room to fetch her. He didn't want to make her wait for him, so he decided to leave seeing that Susan and Hannah were taking their time to get out of their dorm.

It was when he was reaching the exit that they made their appearance. Susan was wearing a light yellow dress and looked rather pretty, while Hannah wore a blue sheath one coupled with a very nice necklace. He wondered what Neville's face would look like if he were here right now. He was breathless himself. If he had to bet, it was pretty safe to say he would look as Ernie was right now, gaping at her partner. Justin was also impressed and was looking at Hannah with a look that suggested he was not as over his crush as he wanted Harry to believe. Harry was the first to snap out of it, as he didn't fancy any of them.

"Hannah, you look beautiful." he said stepping forward. "Neville should like to see a memory of this."

Hannah blushed dangerously. "Thank you Harry. You look pretty good yourself too." she said with a smile.

Harry glanced at Susan and Ernie exchanging pleasantries and altering blushes while Justin came forward and complimented his

best female friend. After a few brief words he announced he was leaving to collect his date and made his way to the exit of the common room.

"Hey Justin! Wait up! We'll walk with you to the Entrance Hall." Harry called after him. Then he turned to Susan and Ernie. "Guys? Coming?"

"Yes. We're right behind you Harry. Shall we?" Ernie asked Susan offering her his arm.

"We shall." Susan replied with a small girlish giggle.

## Chapter 21: The Ball

When they descended to the Great Hall they found it to be as packed with students as the common room had been when they left a few minutes before. The students and teachers were all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open.

Those which were meeting partners from different houses were edging through the crowd, trying to find each other. Despite last year's complaints, Dumbledore persisted in not allowing students into other houses to collect their dates. Justin was gone looking for the fourth year Ravenclaw he had asked out and Hannah was talking to Ernie and Susan. Maybe today it would be the time in which they finally started going out formally. Harry had a look around. He saw Fred and George standing next to their dates, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell. They were wearing neon blue and yellow tuxedos, much like the ones they wore the year before. Maybe they had swapped them.

When he was about to make his way towards the two redheads to compliment them in their choice of colours, the clatter died down suddenly, giving way to hushed whispers. The students, as well as other Professors were turning to look at the Grand Staircase. Harry followed their gaze and his jaw dropped when his eyes settled on Riley. She was descending the stairs in a beautiful royal blue dress with a small smile on her face and looking pretty embarrassed at all the attention. Harry scowled as he saw she was clutching Karl's arm, who was in turn loving the attention and looking very smug.

A path seemed to open in the crowd as they reached the bottom of the stairs. The doors to the Great Hall opened shortly after that and it seemed as if nobody dared to enter before them, as if it was the Boy-Who-Lived's right to occupy the head of the procession. To such extent people adored their Savior and his Light sided family. Most were watching them with looks of adoration and reverence as they gracefully walked to the doors. As expected, he received quite some glares from the Slytherins. His eyes locked with Harry's as he approached his position and they both exchanged a cold glare for a smug expression. Harry's eyes flickered briefly towards Riley, and in all honesty, he didn't know what to make of her expression. She was definitely happy, maybe a bit overwhelmed by the attention, but

Harry could've sworn he also saw some suppressed sadness and guilt in her gorgeous grey eyes as their gazes met.

When the Boy-Who-Lived and his partner were about to reach the doors to the Great Hall the idyllic atmosphere was broken suddenly as three couples came out of the blue and entered just before them. It was no surprise that they were formed by the Weasley twins, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet and some other guy he didn't know, nearly all of them ex-members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

Karl froze, looking livid at their retreating backs. Hannah tugged Harry's robes and along with Ernie and Susan they did as the twins and overtook Karl, who was still frozen in his place. Harry chose to discreetly shove his brother a bit when he went past him. Karl lost a bit his balance and barely managed not to fall. He looked sideways a bit embarrassedly, knowing that everybody had seen his clumsy movement and then he angrily resumed his path, stalking after Harry with his date in tow struggling to keep up without stepping on her dress.

Harry observed with amusement the reaction of his parents and Dumbledore when he came in before than their Golden Boy. The Headmaster frowned and Lily looked disappointed at the magic atmosphere that had so spontaneously originated with Karl's entrance had been hindered, and by Harry and his friends, no less. James was scowling at the twins and Harry didn't doubt that when he eventually looked at him the same expression would remain.

Harry noted that the Great Hall had been decorated in exactly the same fashion as the year before. The only discernible difference came from the replacement of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons banners by Hogwarts'. The walls had been covered in sparkling silver frost, with dozens, if not hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The house tables had vanished and in their place, about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones.

Susan guided the group of defiant couples to a table near the dancing floor where they each took a seat. Harry would have liked a table near a corner and as far as possible from the dancing floor if possible. He'd rather not see Karl and Riley dancing. He didn't think he could bear the sight. However, when he was going to voice his wish to Hannah, he suddenly changed his mind and stayed silent.

He was not her ideal partner and she looked quite excited about the table Susan had got them, so he wouldn't make things hard for her. Besides, it was probable that the table had been booked or else the list thing Justin had told him about would have been pointless. From this table, and much to their delight, both girls could see the couples dancing and comment on their choice of colors for their robes. While they waited for the rest of the students to file in Fred and George came over with their dates and claimed the four vacant seats.

"So what's for dinner?" Fred asked out loud and rubbing his hands.

"We have the same menu thing from last year's Ball. Remember?" Harry told him waving the menu for him to see.

"Oh yeah, I do remember." He smiled mischievously at his brother. "Remember what happens when you order two things at the same time to the same menu?" George let out a laugh.

"I do, but I'd rather not repeat it anytime soon."

"What happened?" Justin's date inquired.

"Two commands at the same time were too much processing for the spell on the menu. It sort of got confused and delivered two of everything." Fred explained.

"A mountain of food appeared in front of him. It covered his plate completely and when the last item was delivered, the soup... well you can imagine it." George continued waving his arms all around to give the tale some drama.

"I did not find it so amusing Weasley." Angelina told him sharply. "My dress was ruined."

"My robes where soaked too!" Fred protested. "Thank Merlin for cleaning and vanishing charms."

"I don't think anyone noticed that. I definitely didn't!" said Harry.

"The attention was all focused on the Champions. Especially in one." Justin said.

"Karl fucking Potter..." Harry growled under his breath.

"I was actually referring to that French Veela, but you may be right too. Remember what a fool he made himself on the dance floor?" Justin said chuckling.

"He spent the entire holidays after that trying to learn. Keyword trying." Harry explained them.

"Well, I guess we'll see if he has improved much soon enough." Fred said with a smirk.

"You don't like him much do you?" asked Justin's date obviously annoyed with their disrespect at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"No. Not at all." Harry said in a cool tone that clearly implied that he didn't want to discuss his brother right now. In fact he wished he wouldn't need to talk about his brother ever again, not even to discuss if his brother should be incinerated or buried. However the girl seemed to be a bit slow and didn't get the clue. She continued questioning him about Karl.

"Why not?" she pressed on as if not being Karl's friend was a crime.

"Why should I?" Harry fought back. The damned girl was getting on his nerves.

On his part, Justin didn't know what to do. He could either side with her defending someone he despised, or side with his friends and positively abandoning his date. He really liked the girl and didn't want to offend her, so he finally settled for the most diplomatic option he could come up with: to bail out. He stood up and asked if anyone wanted a butterbeer from the bar. Only Ernie asked for one while the others argued.

Once they had managed to silence the silly fourth year, without using any type of spell of course, they ordered their meal, most of them settling for the steaks rather than the fish. The conversation after that was much more pleasant and restricted to anything outside Harry or his brother.

At one point during the chow George casually edged closer to Harry. "So Harry, any news of Hedwig?" he asked him in a hushed whisper so that no one would overhear.



"She did arrive at Longbottom Manor this afternoon, a while after lunch. I'm hoping she'll get back before the Ball is over."

"I'm sure she'll be carrying a reply." he assured him. "You instructed her to wait for a reply, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. But I can't stop thinking, 'What if she comes back without one?'"

"Don't worry, she won't. She's a clever owl."

"Clever or not, if she doesn't bring back a reply I think I'll have to go to Longbottom Manor myself to see what's going on."

"And how exactly do you plan to get there?" he asked him skeptically. He was sure that Harry wouldn't do so even if his owl came empty-handed.

"I don't know. I'll get the Knight Bus during the holidays." he declared confidently.

"You'd have to use your wand out of school for that Harry. You know it is illegal." he told him seriously.

"Well I'll figure out a way then!" he snapped. "I just don't want to think about it okay. Let's enjoy the feast for now. If the worst happens, well, then I'll deal with that when it happens."

Once the meal was over Dumbledore stood and proclaimed the start of the dance. The same band from the year before, The Weird Sisters, trooped up onto the stage to a wild and enthusiastic applause. The music started and Dumbledore and Sprout opened the dance. Soon Harry's parents as well as Professor Aurora Sinistra and Professor Charles Hayward, the current DADA teacher, followed in. Karl was one of the first students to drag their partner in, and some seconds after that, and following Susan's lead, Hannah dragged Harry to the brightly lit dance floor.

Having learnt from Riley how to dance at the Ball last year, this time it came naturally to him. He managed to avoid stepping in his partner's feet and soon his troubles seemed to lessen as he enjoyed the dance with Hannah. That is, until he spotted Karl and Riley

dancing nearby, and a bit too close together to his liking. Those first few moments of the dance were a nightmare for him as he couldn't help but keep looking at Riley, who was still evading his gaze. Karl on the other hand looked smugly at Harry and let his hand go a bit further down towards Riley's butt. Harry glared at him repeatedly until so many dancers had come into the dance that thankfully, he couldn't see them anymore. Then he managed to focus on his actual partner, who also seemed to be a bit distracted.

Around them Susan and Ernie were dancing with their gazes fixed on each other and oblivious to anything happening around them, such as Fred and George's exuberant dancing with their dates. Justin and his partner didn't seem so happy, as the girl was lecturing him about the argument she had just had with Harry about Karl Potter. It didn't look as if it were going to work out.

Halfway through the third or fourth song, his parents came a bit too close to their spot. Harry immediately faced the other way round and tried to steer Hannah away from them. In doing so he missed James' look of approval and Lily's hopeful expression.

A while after that, when many people had stopped for a drink and already come back to the floor, the band called for a series of swaps between partners to spice things up a little bit. Harry had to let go of Hannah and ended up dancing with Susan first, which wasn't too weird, and then with Angelina Johnson, the former chaser of the Gryffindor team. In third place he didn't have another choice but to dance with Hermione Granger. They faced each other hesitantly and both of them had a look around to check if there was anyone else to dance with rather than the other. Reluctantly, when the music started playing again, Harry offered her his arm and they started dancing uncomfortably. Despite they didn't exchange a word during the dance, Harry could tell she was itching to start questioning him about anything and everything. Hermione Granger had a reputation for being the resident bookworm and brains of the Golden Trio. Aside from that she had been the top student in their year. No doubt she had heard stories about him from Karl throughout the years, so if she was as intelligent as she was said to be, Harry was sure she would have already recognized the loopholes bound to be in Karl's stories. Harry suspected he was kind of an enigma to her. Perhaps there was still hope for her then. Throughout their brief dance, Harry saw Ron glare at him multiple times.

"And swap!" cried a voice from the stage. Finally! Harry thought, cheering inwardly at being rid of Granger. With a little luck his next partner would be more cheerful.

He looked around for his new partner and saw that everyone was starting to dance with someone else, well everyone except for one. Standing some feet away from him, and giving her back to Harry, was Riley. He quickly looked to his right and spotted his brother dancing with a sixth year, ignoring Harry and Riley. When she turned around and they looked at each other his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs. Although she pulled her eyes away from him and started towards the bar, Harry could tell that she had felt something similar when she had looked at him. He closed the gap rapidly with two long strides. He placed his hand gently on her arm.

"Please. Don't go." he pleaded quietly looking at her in the eyes.

She looked hesitant but she accepted Harry's offered hand. Harry was more of a gentleman than his brother and his hand stayed where it was supposed to be when they engaged in the dance. The rhythm in the song the band was playing now was much slower than in the previous ones, where the partners had danced more freely and with more space between them. This one however seemed to encourage the dancers to dance closer to each other.

Harry studied her for the first few moments of their dance. She seemed reluctant to look at him. It was then when his brother's words from earlier that day sank in.

"He was right..." he said. Riley still didn't look at him but it was obvious that she was listening to him. "You won't even look at me in the face." he said tentatively but feeling a bit angry. Riley did look up at him with her grey eyes then, and Harry saw what he had seen before, a shadow of guilt across her eyes.

"Who said that?" she asked quietly.

"My brother, the scum you're going out with." He couldn't resist to add. "Tell me just one thing I really need to know. Is it true that you regretted ever befriending me?" he said echoing Karl's words from earlier before.

"No. I never said that." she claimed.

"Well it seemed the other way when you have been avoiding me for days. Perhaps you would have continued to do so if we hadn't been paired up."

"Harry, please understand. After all that was said about you I felt betrayed and... scared."

"You could have asked? Don't you think I felt betrayed too when you stopped talking to me? Don't you think I felt betrayed when I saw you coming down the stairs clutching Karl's arm? I remember talking to you about how I hate him! And now I see you here with him."

"I have the right to go with whomever I like Harry." she said defensively. "Besides, why do you so suddenly care who have I come to the Ball with?" she said a little bit snappily.

"Because I do." he said in a flat tone.

"Well, if you wanted me to come with you perhaps you should have asked me."

"Would you have said yes?"

Another swap was called for but Harry didn't move. He was still immersed in Riley's grey eyes waiting for an answer.

"Step away from her." a voice demanded from their side, breaking them out of their reverie. Karl was standing there and looking positively livid. Riley automatically let go of Harry. "I said step away from her!" Karl said louder this time. In hopes of avoiding a confrontation Riley left Harry's side and went to appease Karl.

"It's not what you think, Karl. There was the partner swap and we randomly ended up together." Riley explained.

"Randomly my ass!" he said angrily. "He's been watching you all night, edging closer to you every time there might be a partner swap." he accused.

"You were doing the same thing exactly with Allison Barrett!" Harry fought back. It was widely known that Allison Barrett, a seventh year

Gryffindor, was the most gorgeous girl in the school. Gossip had it that Karl had gone after her many times despite her age difference and she had turned him down every single time.

"You couldn't stay with your own partner could you? You've always been a jealous git. Wasn't your friend's bitch enough for you?" Karl asked maliciously. Harry made a move to advance on him but Karl got his wand out and pressed it against his neck. "Ah, ah. Tell me, does Longbottom know you're stealing her from him? Oh, right, you wouldn't know. He's not been writing you for a while, eh? No wonder he had the sense to break all ties with you."

Harry's eyes narrowed and something snapped in him. Harry wouldn't take anymore from this bastard. Not now, not ever. With astounding speed he grabbed Karl's hand and pointed it, wand included, upwards and away from his neck. Then he placed his right leg behind Karl's legs and with a swift shove he made him fall backwards. Karl had hit a nerve. How does he know I'm not receiving any mail? He knows something. He will tell me!

"How do you know about that!" he cried as he sat astride him and started punching him fiercely in the face. "Tell me what you know!" he yelled.

Punch.

"Why isn't he writing back?"

Punch.

"Who told you about it?"

Punch.

Punch.

"Stupefy!" a voice bellowed somewhere in the crowd. Harry did not see who stunned him.

.oOo.

"Ennervate!" Harry's eyes fluttered open. He had a massive headache.

"Ah, the arsehole broke my nose." Karl wailed from somewhere in the room. Harry could tell they were in their parents' quarters.

"Don't worry sweetie. I'll fix it. I'll make it right." Lily said taking her wand. "Episkey!"

"Aaaargh!" Karl whined again when his nose was put back into place. "It still hurts." he complained. Too bad Riley isn't here. I'm sure she'd enjoy seeing what a pathetic prat my brother is, Harry thought.

"Madam Pomfrey is on her way with some pain relievers." Lily soothed him. Harry couldn't help but snigger at the sight.

"You think it's funny?" his father bellowed somewhere from his right. Harry scowled at him. "What do you think you were doing? Beating him like that! As if you were a common muggle!"

"Must I remind you that he was the one insulting me and holding me at wand point?" Harry snarled.

"I don't want to hear about it!" he said in the same denial mode whenever something bad was said about Karl. "You are in trouble! You're in great trouble! You'll be lucky if I don't get you sent home for assaulting your brother. You deserve no less!"

"Oh yeah, sure. Whenever someone bothers you or your son you expel them out of your way, right? Or perhaps you can put a restraining order to be placed!" Harry yelled edging closer to his father.

"That's it!" James said angrily and coming closer to him. "You're out of the Quidditch team!"

"What?" Harry cried.

"You heard me! You're banned from playing Quidditch. That will show you not to yell at your elders and not to go around beating everyone up!"

"And what about him?" Harry demanded pointing at Karl. "You gonna chuck him out of the team too?" Harry protested.

"I wasn't the one to behave like a Muggle!" Karl sneered.

"Well muggle technique overpowered you and your pretty wand!"

"Muggle fighting isn't allowed in a fair duel!" his brother complained loudly.

"And starting a duel with your wand in your opponent's neck is fair? What will you do if Voldemort," they all flinched "ever takes your wand away Karl? Declare it an unfair duel and walk away?" Harry mocked his brother. "I think not. He'll slaughter you, like a pig!"

"You don't know what you're talking about! You've never faced him!" Karl yelled standing up. He was very angry, more than Harry had ever seen him.

"Enough of this!" Lily shrieked.

"Yes, I agree." Harry said getting up. "I think I'm done here." he said walking to the door.

"No!" James said forcefully, stepping into Harry's path. "We're going to have a little chat. Sit down. We were planning to do this during the holidays but we'll do it now."

"Planning to chat about what? I'm already out of the team! What more do you want from me?"

"Sit down." James instructed him, yanking a chair from beneath the table. "Sit down!" James repeated. "I will not say it again!"

Harry obliged grudgingly. He didn't say a word and just glared at his parents and Karl, who was still in pain and clutching his nose. His father sat himself in another chair, opposite to him. He looked at him very seriously.

"How far gone are you Harry?" his 'father' asked him.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked back in a tired voice.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Now answer the question!" James commanded.

"Look I cannot answer no fucking questions if you don't tell me what this is all about." Harry snapped. Lily didn't look amused by his choice of language but stayed silent.

"Okay, I'll reformulate the question. How long have you been practicing dark magic?" Harry let out an incredulous laugh. He couldn't believe that they were accusing him of going dark. For a moment he felt the need to laugh at the absurdity of the whole situation.

"Are you crazy? You seriously think I've gone Dark?" he laughed. "I thought you were only starting that rumor to cover up your own mess. Now you're telling me that you believe your own lies? You really are pathetic." Harry observed.

"Just quit the act Harry." said James in a bored tone. "We've been watching you for quite some time."

"If that were true then you'd know I've never gone near Dark Magic."

"And what about that Bone Shattering Curse you hit me with in second year?" Karl said. He sounded very proud of himself with the question.

"That ain't Dark Magic! I know at least a dozen light spells that are far worse. Besides I only learnt that curse after you hit Neville with it in our first year!"

"Apart from that there's the way you act Harry." Lily cut in. "You always seem on verge to kill us and Karl."

"And for damn good reason!" Harry barked. "After everything you've-

"

"See?" said James.

"I'm not dark." Harry said angrily through his teeth.

"Come on Harry. You don't have to hide it any longer. We're here now. We're here to help you come back." said Lily.

"There's nothing to help. I've nothing to hide. I... Am... Not... Dark!"



"Says so the Parselmouth." Karl sneered.

"What? How do you know about that?" Harry asked paling.

"Dumbledore told us about it." How the hell did Dumbledore know about it?

"Well, he's wrong then!" he lied. "We Potters are descendants from Gryffindor, aren't we?"

"The trait can be gained through other means: like really dark rituals. I'm sure you know more about it than us." James told him icily.

"You really think I'd do something like that?" he asked disbelievingly.

James continued with the interrogation. "Did the ritual require some type of sacrifice?" he asked really interested in the answer. "Your blood? An animal's life? Someone's life?"

"You used my dog for a ritual?" Karl snarled from his chair at hearing that an animal could be used in some rituals. Three years ago the dog he had gotten for his birthday had been found dead under Harry's window. Although Harry had nothing to do with it and had cared more for the animal than Karl ever had, now his brother seemed to be convinced of his guilt.

"Of course not you prick!" he defended. "I cared for him more than you ever did!"

"You used a human life then?" asked Lily horrified. "Please tell me you didn't!"

"Of course he did!" Karl cut in. "I'm sure he would be capable of taking someone's life. After all he did threaten to kill me this morning right after breakfast."

"Well the world would be far better off without you in it." Harry snapped.

"So you have killed before." James incorrectly assumed.

"Aaargh!" cried Harry desperately. "Do you even have solid evidence beside the rumors that you started?" he accused. "It is a

capital mistake to theorize without proof. Insensibly one begins to twist the facts to suit their own preconceived theories, instead of them to suit the facts."

"We do have evidence." James stated.

"Oh yes?" Harry asked skeptically. "And what would that evidence be? May I see it?"

"Whilst you were unconscious Dumbledore inspected your Aura."

Harry laughed bitterly. "Is there anything you didn't check about me that night? Why did you have to rape my mind anyway?" he was really curious. At first he thought it was just to be able to punish him after his defiance, but after what he had seen, it had to be about something else entirely.

"Nobody raped your mind Harry." Lily told him. "Dumbledore had your father's permission to enter your mind to free it from the dark spell you had messed up." Harry looked at her disbelievingly.

"There was never a dark spell. That's a load of bull you tried to make me believe. Besides, even if it was true, why would you give a senile old man access to my mind? Why? He's not a healer!"

"We've had our doubts for a long time now. It was time we verified them by checking your Aura." James lied, omitting Sirius of the conversation. "Dumbledore says it's the darkest he has ever seen."

"Well he's wrong then!" Harry said. "If my Aura is the darkest he has ever seen, either he hasn't seen much Auras in his life or he should get someone to fix his eyes. My Aura has no thread of darkness in it. I swear."

"Harry please!" Lily begged. She knelt beside him. "Can't you see where this is leading you? The dark arts have pushed you away from us, your family, that loves you." Harry scoffed at that although he was not paying her much attention. He couldn't believe the conversation he was just having with his parents. They thought he was a murderer! "It's even making your friends go away!" Lily continued. "Look what has happened with your friend Neville."

"How do you know about Neville?" he demanded. He stood up and walked towards his brother. "How did you know I'm not receiving his mail?" he yelled.

"Show him Lily." James declared. "Show him what his misguided use of magic is doing with his life."

"Show me what?" Harry asked.

Lily sighed and went to her desk and retrieved a stack of letters. She untied the string that kept them together and handed them to Harry. He recognized the handwriting immediately.

It was Neville's. His parents had Neville's letters! He was right about someone blocking his mail. There would be hell to pay after this. It was the final straw.

He started to read the first letter and halfway through he felt like he was going to be sick. Neville was telling him that it was better if they stopped being friends. He apparently blamed him for his expulsion and didn't wish to become alienated with the light even more. The letter said more but he crumpled it in his fist instead of finishing it. He read the rest over and they more or less said the same and asked him to stop writing to him. It didn't make sense! It couldn't be true! Neville and him had been friends since day one year one. They both had even admitted to each other that they were the first friends they had made in all their life. It just couldn't be true. They had to be faked! Then he looked at the bottom of the letters, where the signature lay. It didn't read Neville, or Mr. Longbottom, or even Lord Longbottom, which he would be in time.

No, they were signed off as 'Sox'. His nickname, his Marauder nickname! Only Sirius and him knew about it.

It was clear to Harry now. Even if he was on good terms with the other Hufflepuffs and even more with the twins, his first friend, the only person he trusted with his life other than Sirius, was Neville. One had abandoned him and the other was unreachable. He was alone.

He bolted through the door. After the door closed James turned to look at her wife. He knew she was feeling very guilty about what they had just done.

"It had to be done." James assure her. "It's the only way he'll realize his mistake and step away from the darkness. You'll see, he'll thank us one day for this."

## Chapter 22: Christmas

Harry found the castle to be very quiet during the holidays, much quieter than he had expected at least. It was so quiet that it unnerved him, in a way. Surely most of the students were gone and the teachers came and went from the castle, yet Harry couldn't have ever imagined it could actually be so empty, and above all things, quiet. He could even hear indistinctive talk coming from the Great Hall from the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room, where normally he would have trouble to hear Neville yelling something from their dormitory.

Neville. It still ached whenever he thought about it. Every single detail of the school reminded him of their past friendship, their long past experiences together. How could he betray him like that after all these years of friendship and camaraderie, he would never understand. And he didn't think he wanted to. If Neville ever came back to the school he wouldn't listen to anything he had to tell him. It didn't matter to him anymore. All the letters that his mother had collected hoping not to burden him with it, had burned in the fireplace of the common room. Well, not all of them. He had stored away one of them. He didn't know why. He just did.

Sum all this to the fact that Sirius wasn't able to contact him either, Riley avoided him, his parents thought him to be a murderer and hated him, and he was being portrayed as an evil dark wizard by the press, he was now desperately yearning to get out of this world.

It had already been decided. He wouldn't wait long to leave Britain. He would just stay put and wait until the year was over and then disappear off somewhere to have a fresh start away from all this. After all, sixth and seventh years were not compulsory. With his OWLs under his belt he would be able to find work anywhere magical outside Britain.

Apart from Harry, three first years and two third years were the only Hufflepuffs that had chosen to remain here during the holidays. He knew for a fact that some others that were planning to do so had erased their names from the list at once when they were told that Harry would be staying too. It was doubtless that those were devoted readers of the Prophet and lapdogs of the Potters.

There were obviously other students in the other Houses that were staying for the holidays too. Much to his dismay the Weasley twins were not among them. Even worse, his brother's new girlfriend, Riley, had agreed to stay at his request. This was the reason he was sitting in front of the fireplace of the Hufflepuff common room right now. He was avoiding them. He had crossed paths with the two of them the first day of the break and Karl hadn't doubted to pull Riley into a deep and long kiss to spite him. Since then Harry spent nearly all day holed up in his common room doing his Christmas homework. However, whenever he wanted to practice his Animagus unaccomplished form he took refuge in the privacy of the Room of Requirement.

Unfortunately he had lent the Map to the twins a few days before the Ball and they hadn't remembered to give it back, so he had to be extra careful not to be seen as he entered the Room. That cloak was really a masterpiece and really difficult to tell at simple sight if someone was there hiding beneath it. However, it was not immune to detection spells and it would easily come off if someone summoned it. This is why Harry, just in case, every time he was about to enter the Room, he checked with the Homenum Revelio spell that neither Karl nor James were spying on him under the Invisibility cloak. Sadly he couldn't do anything to protect himself against the original Marauder's Map. He was sure that they had seen him sometime disappear into the Room. Bet they had been pissed.

As the Room of Requirement drew magic from the castle itself to work, the possibilities for conjuring sceneries was vast, only limited to the user's imagination. When he came here to practice, Harry always made sure to exploit the Room's potential and ask it to transform into chain of enormous mountains in which he could fly freely. Outside, in the Hogwarts grounds his movements were limited by the wards. Nothing physically impeded him from going through them, but Dumbledore would know, and after what had happened a few days ago at the Ball, it would only be asking for more trouble.

He would normally fly for a while, getting more and more confident and daring in his dives. Then he would land somewhere in the mountains and concentrate on his other form. Due to being in the Infirmary and having more important things on his mind, he hadn't practiced too much during the last few weeks. Sure enough Sirius'

theory about taking a break in it was working. He was certain that his second form was indeed a Panther, a black Panther, and had started working on it, managing to change his hands into paws.

Still, he couldn't hide from his family forever, not even for a day if he wanted to have something to eat. After the Ball, he had started to have all of his meals in the kitchens again. It worked well enough until Dumbledore changed the portrait that gave access to the kitchens and set up a password. Harry had tried summoning one of the House Elves but apparently Dumbledore had foreseen that and had confined them to the kitchens with strict orders not to aid any student.

Sneaking into Hogsmeade worked for a while too. But eventually he ran out of money.

Finally, defeated and hungry, he showed up at the Great Hall for lunch the day before Christmas. All of the occupants halted their conversations and turned to look at him as he pushed the double doors open. James and Karl shared a smirk as Dumbledore smiled knowing that he had bent Harry to his will thus showing who was in charge here.

"Ah, Mr. Potter." he greeted him too warmly for it to be real. "How very nice of you to join us. You're just in time, the house elves are about to serve lunch."

Harry nodded silently and walked toward the single table near the far end of the Great Hall where the staff usually sat. The four House tables were gone. Instead a round table had been conjured, only big enough to sit all of those who were staying at the castle during the holidays. Though round tables did not technically have a preferential place, or a head of the table as it is called, it could be clearly seen who presided it, Dumbledore. He sat in the same throne like chair he normally used and that towered above the rest, giving him an air of greatness. He was facing the oak doors. At his right, the Potter family with James sitting at his side, at his left, his staff, and in the remaining seats, the students.

This was where Harry would have to sit, among the younger students, in between a first year Slytherin and a first year Gryffindor. I'll never know how I can still expect them to save me a place with them after the way they've treated me all these years. He thought

bitterly. All people present looked at him expectantly and in silence. Karl sniggered as Harry pulled out the chair and sat on it. In turn Harry glared at him. Silence reigned in the table for a few seconds. Everyone looked at Harry. Some discreetly and some, like his family and Dumbledore, were openly looking at him.

Harry's stomach grumbled wildly. Dumbledore shared knowing glances with James. Harry scowled at him and didn't miss the smirk across his brother's face. You have denied me food, expecting me to come here, which I have. Some call you noble, great even, blind fools they are. I call you ignominious if here you are laughing at your defeated opponent. There's nothing noble in that, Dumbledore.

"I must admit I expected you to show up earlier." Dumbledore said.

"Well I'm sorry to disappoint." Harry said bitterly.

"How did you manage it? To pass three days without a bite is quite a feat."

"Bah, he probably conjured food with dark magic." Karl sneered.

"Karl!" Lily berated her son. They had to work to bring him back to the family, not alienate him.

"Are you actually as stupid as you look?" Harry asked him acidly.

"Harry!" Lily cried.

"Conjured food doesn't stay in your stomach very long and has no nutrients at all." he explained.

"So you admit you did." Karl said smugly.

"Not denying a lie doesn't make it truthful."

"You're wrong. Most times failing to deny something equals admitting its truth." James said.

"I'm not having this conversation again." Harry declared annoyed.  
"You can believe what you will. I don't care."



"Harry, we understand that you're uncomfortable about this, but just remember that we're here for you. You don't have to recur to horrible things like the Dark Arts." his mother told him and making him angrier. Harry punched the table loudly, releasing some of his built up anger. He sighed then and looked at his parents.

"Have any of you ever heard the story of Oedipus?" Harry asked after some time.

"Isn't he the guy who killed his father and married his mother?" asked Riley speaking for the first time, and narrowing her eyes in confusion.

"Trying to tell us something Harry?" asked Karl grabbing Riley's hand with his. Harry glared at him.

"You're right Riley, he was." he said softly looking at her. "Oedipus was born to King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. When he was born a Seer came to see his father and she told him a Prophecy." Dumbledore and his parents flinched when they heard it. Oddly enough, Karl did not. Are you too confident or too ignorant? Harry thought to himself. "A Prophecy that concerned his family. When his son Oedipus was old enough, he would kill him and then would marry Jocasta. King Laius immediately ordered his son to be abandoned in the mountains in an attempt to stop the Prophecy from ever happening. Young Oedipus was found by a shepherd of the nearby kingdom of Corinth. He immediately took him to his King and Queen, who without children of their own, adopted him as their own son. There he grew up, never knowing about his true origins. A few years later he learned of the Prophecy and not wanting to unintentionally harm his father, he ran away. And guess where he ran off to. He fled to Thebes. While he was travelling, he came across his birth father. They had a dispute and Oedipus killed him in self-defence, unwillingly fulfilling part of the prophecy. Then, when he arrived in Thebes he found a Sphinx at its gates that has been impeding the flow of travellers to and from the city. Oedipus got the riddle right, thus freeing the city. As a reward they appointed him as their new king and gave him the recently widowed Queen Jocasta's hand in marriage." Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling furiously when he finished the tale.

"That was a very nice story, Harry. Where did you learn it?" Lily asked trying to be nice to her son.

This ought to be interesting, Harry thought before answering her. "From Sirius." he said curtly. James turned an interesting shade of green. "He used to take me around the Muggle world when I was little. Never wondered where I spent all the afternoons during Primary School?" he asked looking pointedly at his father.

"It is a magnificent story, my boy." Dumbledore cut in hoping to avoid a conflict.

"Yes, but I fail to see what it has to do with anything." Karl said looking bored.

"You, all of you, I don't know how, or why, have decided I'm going to turn dark and are doing your worst to avoid it."

"Harry-" Lily began to interrupt but Harry continued his speech.

"Dark Magic," he said raising his voice over hers, "as the Headmaster here has clearly explained to all of us many times, feeds of anger, hatred, resentment, that kind of feelings, right?"

"Right." the headmaster replied frowning. Where is this going? he was surely wondering.

"By trying to escape his fate, Oedipus set into motion the very events he wanted to avoid. Like a self-fulfilling Prophecy if you wish. That is what you're doing now. By supposedly trying to keep me away from dark magic you're, ironically, creating the perfect atmosphere for me to fall to the temptation. First you order Karl to attack me so you can explore my mind at will. Then you expel my best friend under no grounds for saving me from your illicit mind rape, thus creating even more resentment towards my family, as I know that you have done it for your own selfish reasons."

"Harry..." James started to protest.

"After that, you send Sirius away," Harry continued rising his voice over his father's. There were a few gasps. "which leads us to the transformation of resentment into anger. I don't know what you're planning next, but be advised, the next step brings us to hatred, pure, deep and intense hatred towards you."

Now, that had got their attention. Hopefully they would see how wrong they were and let him alone.

"And it's not happening to me only." he continued. "You treat the Slytherins the same way. Two eleven year olds can be perfectly friendly on the Express the first night they come here. If one of them is sorted into Slytherin and the other is not their friendship's gone. How can you expect them not to follow Voldemort when they graduate. You humiliate and belittle them every day during seven years. No wonder they run to Voldemort when he promises them power, greatness and above all a chance to get even with people like you."

He was finished here. His appetite had only taken two bites to appease. He stood up from the table pushing his chair back forcefully. He had barely touched his food.

"Where are you going?" James asked, angry at Harry leaving the table without any kind of manners.

"I cannot eat. I've lost my appetite. Besides, I'm finicky about company right now."

For the second time in so many minutes James turned green. Karl looked sour too. It wasn't any day that someone declared that he wasn't good company.

.oOo.

Christmas day came and Harry still had little interest in the festivity. Until he had come to Hogwarts it had been a day for mixed emotions. The little amount of money his parents spent in his scarce presents compared to what they spent on Karl was always discouraging and depressing, a constant reminder of the hierarchy at home, especially since Sirius had been declared persona non grata by his parents and his presents for Harry always ended up in the wrong hands.

Things had got better when he started going to Hogwarts. Although he still spent Christmas at Potter Manor, his parents didn't take away Sirius' presents, thinking they were from some of Harry's friends. Of course at that time Dumbledore hadn't labeled him as a Dark wizard yet, and he was not the Boy-Who-Lived either, so he didn't rank very high in James' and Lily's priorities. They hadn't

bothered to know that he only was friends with Neville because the rest of Hufflepuffs were wary of Karl, or in love with him.

This year however, was well on its way to be the worst ever. No presents had come at all. The foot of his bed was absent presents. For starters, his parents hadn't sent anything. He really didn't want to know if it was because they were punishing him or they had simply forgotten. It would not be the first time. Sirius and Neville hadn't sent anything either. In Sirius case it was forgivable, but in Neville's, that brat, was not. After reading the letters, and in a fit of rage, Harry had destroyed with a well aimed Reducto the present he had bought for Neville.

.o0o.

On one of the last days of holiday Harry was sleeping peacefully, dreaming that he transformed into Horus and flied to distant lands away from his family and Hogwarts where nobody knew him when the knocks woke him up. He found himself lying on a couch beside the fire of the common room and for a second he felt disoriented, not knowing which time it was or what had woken him up. He rubbed the sleep off his eyes and checked the hour in his watch. It was well past dinner time and the sun had already settled.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

It was probably his parents, wanting to know why he hadn't showed up for dinner. Again. No, they have the passwords to all common rooms. Why knock then? Ruling out the staff, the Hufflepuffs, who knew the password, and other students afraid of him, only left his brother, or perhaps Riley. He certainly didn't want to face his brother, and Riley... he wasn't sure about her. They had been friends, sort of, and she had betrayed that by going out with Karl when she knew that he hated him. He turned on his side and closed his eyes hoping that whoever it was, would go away.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

He ignored them. A few seconds later, when Harry was thinking that whoever it was had left, the person in question knocked again.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Bloody hell!" he cried out loud. He took out his wand and pointed it at the entrance, ready to silence it.

"Come on Harry! We know you're in there!" he heard a faint voice yell from the other side. That wasn't Karl's voice, and definitely not Riley's.

He came close enough to the entrance for it to recognize him as a Hufflepuff and open up automatically. At the other side the Weasley twins were standing.

"Took you long enough!" Fred complained good-naturedly as he pushed past him and into the room.

"Sorry." He said a bit groggily. "I thought it was my 'dear' brother, coming to bait me. How did you know I was in here?"

"George didn't remember to return you the Map before leaving." he said tossing it at Harry.

"Oh thanks. This will come in handy to avoid them."

"You mean your parents?" they asked as they all took a sit on the couches in front of the fire.

"No. Well them too actually. I was thinking more of Karl and Riley. Every time I've crossed them he makes a point to kiss her."

"What a prick!" Fred declared. "We'll make sure to prank him double time after the holidays."

"Sure we'll do." his twin agreed. "So how has your holiday been going?"

"Terrific." he said sarcastically. "I have to share table with my parents, Karl and his... and Riley every meal or else I won't find any food around here. Apart from that I've been burying myself in my studies and other things. It keeps me from thinking about... stuff." The twins nodded sympathetically. Harry had told them about Neville's letters before they had boarded the train.

"What about you?" he asked them.

"It is pretty much as every other holiday. Things are tense at the Burrow. Bill is the only one we can have a civilized conversation with. Percy moved out last summer and Ron, well you know him, he's a prick."

"Charlie seems to be coming around though. He even came with us and Bill to Azkaban to visit her." George said in a quiet voice.

"How is she faring?" Harry asked concerned.

"Not well." said Fred in a hushed voice and looking very gloom. They both did. Ginny was the only thing that could make them feel like that. "She still remains sane. But I fear it won't be long before she cracks. She still does recognize us, with difficulty though, but she still does."

Harry nodded sympathetically. He knew it was very hard for them to talk about her. As far as he knew, he was the only one outside his family with whom they would talk about her. He decided to change the topic of conversation.

"So how do you like my humble quarters?" he said waving his hands all around.

"Your quarters?" asked Fred skeptically. "There are no other Puffs staying for the holidays? You have the whole place for yourself?"

"Oh, there are some of the lower years, but it seems they are afraid of the Hufflepuff Dark Lord." Harry admitted amusedly. "Every time I enter this room they look at me as if I was going to kill them in the spot. It doesn't take them even a minute to clear the room and leave me alone. Sometimes they avoid this place like the plague all day long and seem hesitant to cross it when they want to get to their dorms to sleep."

"Perks of being mini-Voldemort, I suppose." George teased him good-naturedly.

"Too bad it will only last until tomorrow." Harry said. "I've kind of grown to appreciate the silence. So care to tell me what are you doing here? I know that you didn't come all the way from the Burrow just to have a nice chat with me." Harry asked.

"Trust me, this is as good as our holidays can get. Might be we'll visit you again before the term starts." said George.

"Yeah, we should have visited earlier. Anyway, we're here because the Order is here and having a meeting. Mother worries too much and doesn't want to leave anyone alone at the house on these dark times." Fred explained. Harry nodded thoughtfully.

"You up for a little Quidditch match?" he asked them.

"Now?"

"Yes. What is it?" he asked at seeing their reluctant looks.

"We were hoping to eaves drop in a certain meeting?" Fred said producing three pairs of Extendable ears from his pocket.

"Oh, I see. I don't think I'll ever say this again but, Quidditch can wait."

.oOo.

At that time, in one of Hogwarts' lesser used classrooms, the Order Meeting was about to start. As always, its members had answered to their leader's summon when their phoenix shaped rings had warmed up, warning them about the impending meeting. As was traditional in these meetings, Dumbledore had conjured a very big and fairly long table and had claimed the head of the table as his. The members of his organization stood in different groups, discussing many kinds of topics and making time before the meeting started.

"Please friends!" Dumbledore said, raising his voice over theirs. "Let us be seated so we can get started."

Slowly but steadily, the classroom became silent as everyone had a seat at the long table. Of course, the seats at Dumbledore's right were occupied by the Potters. Alastor Moody, true to his paranoid nature grabbed a chair and sat beside the door, which he had thoroughly locked and silenced. However, he had not foreseen the windows at the other side of the room. One of them was slightly open, and its opaque glassed windows hid three real looking ears attached to an awkward string.

Harry and the twins had chosen an empty classroom two floors above the room where the meeting was taking place. From the opened windows they had lowered their extendable ears so that they were hanging just outside the room where the Order of the Phoenix was meeting.

"So let's get started." Dumbledore said once he had everyone's undivided attention. "I'd like to thank you, all of you, for coming to this routine meeting. I'm sure that you'd all like to get this over with as soon as possible so you can get back to your families so I'll try to make it as fast and smooth as possible."

"Excuse me Albus." someone said. Harry didn't recognize the voice but he thought it was vaguely familiar. "Before we start, there is something that many of us would like to discuss."

"And that would be?"

"There are some of us that are concerned with the Potter's eldest son, Harry."

"And what do you want with him?" Lily snapped.

"Well, ever since I enlisted in the Order we've been discussing possible threats to our side."

"Harry is not a threat." Dumbledore said clearly. He still can be brought to the Light.

"There are those rumours that he and his buddy Longbottom attacked you." Moody countered. "And he certainly attacked his brother." he added looking at the Potters.

"And he's said to be a Dark Wizard too. How can he not be a threat?" Harry heard someone in the background say. His eyes flashed with anger.

"Young Harry is being dealt with. What happened between us will stay between us. And that fight with his brother was a mere argument between two teenagers that got out of hands. Surely you have seen many like that."



"That wasn't a fight Albus." Snape said. "Karl Potter was clearly overwhelmed by his 'inferior' brother." He gave James a pointed look. "He didn't even have the chance to fight back."

"Harry Potter is not a violent person." Dumbledore declared. "He may have been misguided and treacherously lured to the Dark side but that doesn't make him a murderer or a sociopath."

"Albus, all we want is a guarantee. Some of us have children currently attending Hogwarts, and we'd like to know how much of a danger he may pose to our children." a male voice said.

"Very well, you have my guarantee that no harm will come to your children."

"That doesn't work for me Albus." said the voice that Harry had heard before. "My son is friends with him. How can you guarantee that Potter won't lure him to the dark arts?"

"Mrs. Macmillan, steps have already been taken to stop Harry from continuing down that path. However, if that failed and you felt your son was slipping into the dark arts, we would keep young Mr. Potter away from your son the same way we've forcefully kept him from coming in contact with Mr. Longbottom, whose mind we think he had already poisoned."

"What do you mean by keep him away?" Mr. Macmillan asked through gritted teeth. "Do you forget that they sleep in the same room, eat in the same table, and attend the same classes?"

"I'm sure we could figure something out." Dumbledore said calmly.

"I say you expel him now and good riddance!" Mrs. Macmillan exclaimed hotly. There were several nods of agreement in the room.

"In Mr. Longbottom case's expulsion was justified. I can't expel Mr. Potter under no grounds."

"Well you have clearly admitted that he's gone Dark." Mrs. Weasley declared.

"If every wizard suspected of going Dark was expelled then he'd have to expel most Slytherins, Mum." Bill Weasley retorted.

"Either way I am confident that it isn't necessary to expel anyone." Dumbledore said.

"How could you hope to keep them apart then?"

"Well in Mr. Longbottom's case, he and Harry continued to write letters to each other even after the expulsion. Of course, we had to discourage this attitude in order to help both of them and bring them back to the right path, so we had to fabricate some letters that ensured they wouldn't talk to each other in a long time."

"You did what?" Bill Weasley asked dumbfounded and very infuriated with what he had heard. Several others didn't look very pleased either. Snape was certainly disgusted but not at all surprised.

"It is for the greater good Bill. What if it was your brother Ron he was friends with? Would you like to see him doomed to the same fate as Ginevra? A lifetime in Azkaban?" Mrs. Weasley asked him hotly.

"People should be able to choose who're they friends with!" he declared. "Without any meddlesome fools thinking they are entitled to run their lives in order to achieve the 'greater good'!"

"Bill Weasley! Don't talk to the Headmaster that way!" his mother berated him.

"I'll address him the way I like. He had no right to do what he's done. And neither had you." He declared looking at the Potters.

"Listen here boy!" James exclaimed angrily. "You don't have a family of your own so I don't think you can lecture us about how to raise a child!"

"Anyone with a bit of sense and without bias should be able to point out that you have made a poor job. You don't trust one of them and have raised the other one to be an arrogant bully."

"William Weasley!" shrieked his mother indignantly. "You will apologize this instant-"

"No Mother! I've had enough. I'm not following someone that does that to a child. From what the twins have told me, Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom were perfectly normal kids until Dumbledore and the Potters descended on them. I quit." he said looking at Dumbledore. He tossed at him his Order Ring and then he exited the room.

"I say we Obliviate him." Moody told Dumbledore quietly as he walked towards him. "He knows too much. If the Death Eaters were to capture him..."

"Don't worry Alastor. You have all been sworn to Secrecy remember? The Oath would kill him before he could speak a word." Dumbledore told him. "Now, let's continue, may we?"

.o0o.

Two floors above them Harry was sitting under the windowsill with a blank expression. The twins sat opposite of him regarding him with looks of pity. They suspected the kind of feelings Harry was harboring. He felt hatred, absolute and cold hatred towards Dumbledore and his parents for their deception.

He also felt anger, and shame, mostly at being so easily deceived. Dumbledore had gone through his mind and could have easily known about their Animagus and nicknames. Sox's signature on those letters shouldn't have made him doubt Neville, not even for a second. He should have expected those letters to be faked coming from his parents. That they had been tampering with his mail should have been enough to make him suspicious. But no, he had easily believed that his parents had been blocking his mail when they saw by chance one of the letters, hoping he would never see them and that way they would spare him unnecessary suffering. He smacked the front of his head repeatedly until Fred's hand grabbed him by the wrist. He looked at him and only then he registered what he had been doing.

However, the most intense feeling Harry was experiencing was determination. His parents had been playing a game based on lies and half truths with him. Now that he knew, he was about to enter the game himself, only that now he knew the basics of the game, and he certainly wasn't going to abide by any rules.

He stood up with a determined expression and turned to the twins, who were mirroring his movements and getting up from their seats. His green eyes glowed with anger.

"I'm gonna need your help. I'm going to see Neville."

## Chapter 23: The Board's Decision

Very far away, at the other end of the United Kingdom, Neville Longbottom wasn't having an ideal holiday either. For starters, his grandmother had insisted that he didn't stop his classes for the holidays. She claimed that she had to catch up on all that schoolwork he had missed during the first days in which he hadn't had a tutor. It was funny in a way, Neville thought, that if Pettigrew was doing anything, it was slowing him down, so his catch up work grew even larger by the minute.

Thankfully he had Sirius to help him in his studies. As the grim like Animagus had proposed before the start of the holidays, Neville had started independent studying, asking Sirius for some pointers here and there, but he did so mostly without assistance. Especially after Sirius had gone on some trip abroad and had been so foreseeing that he had left his mirror behind thus leaving him stuck with Augusta Longbottom and six classes a week with Peter Pettigrew for the whole Christmas holidays.

Even so, none of that was the worst part. No, the last straw to his vexing 'holiday' had come in the form of a letter the morning of the day before Christmas. He had been delighted when he looked through the window that morning and spotted Hedwig coming towards them with a letter attached to her talon. He was delighted that Harry had written him after so many days without news of him.

He opened the letter in the same fashion he had untied it from Hedwig's talon, with excitement. Oddly enough, Harry's owl took off without waiting for a reply, nor pecking his finger the way she usually did. He shrugged it off, and started to read the letter. If anyone was observing Neville at that moment, he would have seen the teen's excited face turn into a confused frown, then a sneer before finally turning several shades of red when he was reaching the end of the letter. He stood there for some time, frozen, with the letter in his hands and looking at it unbelievably before he crumpled it in his hands and let out an outraged cry. He ran up to his room, barricaded himself in and started throwing a fit of apocalyptic proportions.

Meanwhile, Augusta Longbottom sat in her armchair in the living room below with a contempt smile while she heard her grandson destroy his room. It was for the greater good that his son didn't associate with that good for nothing boy.

.oOo.

"I just want to be left alone, that's all. I don't want to see my parents watching my every move as if I was about to explode." Harry said miserably as he plopped down on the armchair back at the Hufflepuff common room. "Isn't there any way to be rid of them? Perhaps I should apply to the Ministry for emancipation?" he said. Fred and George looked at each other for a brief moment, their expressions full of doubt. Harry didn't miss it. "Oh come on guys, I'm sure there have been cases like mine before."

"Harry, applying for emancipation is difficult as is unwise." Fred said.

"Unwise?"

"You are the Potter Heir, Harry. Would you pass up on all your inheritance just to be rid of them for two years, when you'll be free to walk away?" Fred asked.

"I don't care about my family's money!" Harry snapped. "Besides, I'm sure that by now my father will have made arrangements so that mostly everything goes to Karl."

"Perhaps so, but in ancient families such as yours, there are things that can be only passed on to the true heir. There's no way to fool magic into thinking that Karl is the firstborn of your father. He may be able to get all the money, and lands, but the other things, such as the title of Head of the House of Potter goes to you."

"Unless I get emancipated." Harry said.

"Yes." George gave in. "In that case you lose any claim, legally and magically over your inheritance."

"Well, that settles it then. I'm sure that my father will be glad to let me get emancipated so Karl can have his precious title. I'll be out of his way; they'll be out of mine. We'll all be happy."

"I don't think they won't let that happen, Harry, ever." George said. "They will go to no ends to ensure it does not happen."

"Why?"

"Harry, if you get emancipated you'll be renouncing your family, legally and magically. There's no turn around after that. What happens then if Voldemort kills your brother?"

Harry thought for a moment. "The line ends." he said quietly as it dawned on him.

"Your father may fawn all over your brother and boast about how he will be the greatest wizard of all time, but he would have to be stupid to jeopardize the Potter line in such a way."

"Well my father isn't known for his intelligence." Harry argued. "Apart from the fact that my parents could have another child. They're not too old yet."

"I think that if your parents wanted or could have another child they would have by now. I do remember once overhearing your mother tell mine how much she would love having too many children too."

"So there's no way I can get emancipated then?" Harry said, suddenly feeling angry. It had seemed such a good idea.

"I don't think so. Dumbledore would bring this to the Wizengamot the moment he found out you applied for emancipation. And remember, he runs the Wizengamot. Along with your parents they have the majority of the votes."

"Perhaps if I presented some evidence about what they've done to me the outcome could be different." Harry said. "Some of the voters would be inclined to vote differently."

"What proof Harry?" George said softly.

"What proof?" Harry yelled incredulously. "They stunned me and roamed through my mind at will! Neville and Snape can testify to that."

"Neville and Snape could only tell how Dumbledore was leaning over you." Fred said.

"Well he was doing something more." Harry said bitterly.

"We know. But Snape was, and maybe still is, a Death Eater. The Wizengamot wouldn't listen to his testimony."

Harry buried his face in his hands, despaired. He wanted to get away from his parents, more than anything else in the world, yet Fate, it seemed, was bent on making things difficult for him, as it always had. He suddenly remembered his dream of that night, where he had flown away in his Animagus form to distant lands where nobody knew him and his parents couldn't reach him.

"I will run away then." Harry said determinedly as he looked up. "I'll disappear and won't let them find me. I won't have to stand them anymore but I'll still be the heir. That's what you said, right? Even if I'm gone for a long time and my family tries to declare me dead so Karl can have all, the magic will know better, right?"

"Right." Fred said, looking a bit uncertain. "And where would you go?"

"Out of the country, for sure. Look, sixth and seventh year are optional, so once I get my OWLs done with, I won't be bound to come back here to finish my education. Perhaps I can finish it somewhere else? At a different school, or with a tutor even."

"Good grades in your OWLs would get you a decent work anywhere." Fred said. "You would have to stay here until you sit your OWLs though."

"It would be enough to house and feed you, but I don't think it would be enough to pay for a tutor, let alone a magical school." George pointed out.

"He's right." Fred said, backing up his brother. Harry felt miserable when the twins pointed out another problem with his plan. For a moment he thought they were deliberately trying to sabotage his attempts of getting rid from his family, but his doubts went away as fast as they had appeared. The twins were speaking honestly, pointing out problems he had overlooked.

"The real problem though, is how do you get out of the country?" George said. "You would need an International Portkey."



"Yes, that kind of ruins the whole leave without traces plan." Harry admitted. "That's why I would rather use Muggle means. I'll get a plane across the Atlantic. I'll go to the USA. That's where Neville and I planned going to once Hogwarts was over."

"That brings us back to the issue with money, not just magical but Muggle money too if you want to pay for a plane ticket." Fred pointed out.

Harry scowled at no-one. Running away had difficulties too. "Sirius will help me." he declared suddenly. "It's perfect. Outside the country the restraining order won't have any effects and he'll be able to help me. He could even tutor me himself!"

The twins smiled. This plan was starting to shape nicely. Maybe it would work out.

"He'll understand more than anyone. He ran away from his family too." Harry explained.

"You'll have to get him a message and explain all this. Otherwise he won't be able to assist you." Fred said. "And we know that mail isn't safe enough."

"Neville probably still has his mirror." Harry said, his eyes alight with anticipation. "If I manage to get to Neville's house I will be able to talk with Sirius through our mirrors. Mine was shattered when Karl attacked me, but I don't think Neville's was."

"You were really serious about going to see him." Fred observed quietly.

When Harry had told them as much after hearing about the fake letters, Fred had thought it was more of a prideful statement in a moment of grief and anger than something he really intended to go through with.

"Of course I was." he said. "I will need a plan though."

"Oh, but we do love plotting!" Fred said.

That answer didn't come as a surprise for Harry, especially after having seen all kind of elaborate and difficult pranks they had pulled off.

.o0o.

When he went into the Three Broomsticks it didn't take Albus Dumbledore long to find his former school colleague. Sitting in a small table, his lifelong friend and current spokesperson of the Board of Governors was browsing through the Daily Prophet. He had a meal for two set up in front of him.

"Adrian, my friend!" Dumbledore said in a manner of greeting as he approached to the table.

The equally old man looked up. "Albus! It is good to see you. If it only were in different circumstances." he said sadly. "I have taken the liberty to have dinner set up already. I am in a bit of a hurry, I'm afraid."

"Not to worry, my friend." Dumbledore assured him. "Ah, Roast Beef, my favorite." he said amiably as they sat down.

For a while they spent their time in idle conversation, reliving old adventures they had had together at school and mostly remembering old times over a pleasant meal.

"So, tell me, why are we here?" Dumbledore asked eventually, when there were no stories left to remember. He already knew it was about the Board of Governors and their decision, but he wanted to hear it from his friend's voice.

"We had a meeting at the Board of Governors today. The meeting, Albus."

"I had been wondering when it would take place and when we would be notified about the outcome."

"Letters have already been sent for a summons tomorrow at noon. No doubt James Potter has already received his and is pacing around nervously. Your copy must be at your office table by now. I wanted to give you the news personally though."

"Something tells me I won't like the Board's verdict very much." Dumbledore said, suddenly feeling a tight knot in his belly.

His friend regarded him for a second and then his expression turned into a faint smile. "You're going to be Headmaster for a few more years." he said.

Dumbledore left out a relieved breath that he hadn't known he was holding. Of course he had been almost certain that he would retain his position, but with so much at stake he didn't feel overly confident about it.

"And what about James Potter? Should I worry?" Dumbledore asked as he attacked what was left of his meal while it was still warm. If he had been cleared James should have been too. After all it was Dumbledore who had used illegal Legilimency on a student.

His old friend sighed. "You'd better start looking for a new Transfiguration teacher, Albus."

Dumbledore looked up from his dish with a perplexed expression. "He's being fired?" he asked disbelievingly. His friend nodded from across the table.

"Unfortunately." he said with a shrug. "Sirius Black's article on the prophet didn't do us any good. Some concerned parents raised their opinions about how James Potter had stunned his son."

"It was actually his brother who did it." Dumbledore said. His friend paid him no mind as he continued on.

"If he's done that to his own son, what won't he do to other students?' people asked. Some of the students parents were losing faith on the Board as it was, we couldn't afford to sit and do nothing. Besides, James Potter was also suspended from the Aurors."

"So you needed a scapegoat." Dumbledore concluded.

"You should be pleased that it was James Potter's head instead of yours. Malfoy and his Slytherin colleague wanted both your heads. I suspect they wanted you out from Hogwarts to make it easier for Voldemort to attack the school when the times come. Thankfully the

Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs knew how important was that you remained as Headmaster, so we were able to keep you in office. For Malfoy, Potter's head on a silver plate was the next best thing."

.o0o.

Harry emerged from the library with a satisfied smile a couple of days after Christmas. He had finally finished all his catching up as well as his Christmas homework. It was a small victory that helped him lighten his mood. Being freed of his homework, Harry was now facing loads of free time during the next five days when the classes would start again. Maybe it would have been better for him if he had even more homework to busy himself with. Christmas assignments and homework had provided a great distraction that kept him from thinking about all that had happened during the past few weeks. Now he had to find something else to keep him busy, and practicing his Animagus was number one in his to-do list, aside from planning how to escape at the end of the year and visiting Neville as soon as it was possible.

He felt strangely entertained as he walked out of the Library in a rickety manner making as much noise as he could. Madam Pince was out today, or at least that was what Harry assumed, seeing she hadn't shown up in the last four hours. Nobody, not even the old Librarian had thought about locking up the doors to the Library or the Restricted Section at the very least, so Harry had enjoyed being able to work without worrying about the old librarian descending on him.

It was when he finally made it to the Common Room that his Head of House managed to find him. He didn't even manage to get in as the Herbology teacher called after him when he was just opening the entrance to their common room.

"Mr. Potter!" she called as she approached him walking rapidly. "Mr. Potter, wait!"

"Professor Sprout." he acknowledged her once she was close enough. "Is something wrong?"

"I was wondering if I could have a word with you Mr. Potter." she asked. "There is something we should discuss." Harry felt a sudden feeling of dread. He hoped this wasn't about his alleged dark

tendencies or something along those lines. He also hoped this wasn't Dumbledore's doing.

"Certainly. Would you terribly mind if I left these in my room first?" he asked showing her his bag full of books.

"Of course." she agreed. "I'll be waiting for you at my Office."

Harry entered the common room and smiled in a mixture of amusement and annoyance as the first years sitting there tensed up immediately when they saw him. He quickly made it to his dorm and locked away his homework safely in his trunk. When he crossed the common room again in his way out, it was deserted. Presumably the first years had run off somewhere the moment he had disappeared into his dorm.

A couple of minutes later he was sitting face to face with his Head of House at her Office. It was littered with very odd plants that Harry had never seen before and he doubted that many seventh years or even Neville knew about.

"First of all let me tell you that I was sorely disappointed in your behavior during the Ball Mr. Potter." she started in a reprimanding tone.

"I know that I let you down Professor. My brother said some mean things to me and after all that has happened I just snapped. I'm sorry. It won't happen again though, I promise."

"I know that you've been through quite a lot of things during these past few days, but it isn't reason enough to beat someone in the Great Hall. While I would normally agree on you being kicked out of the Quidditch team for your actions, I would be willing to make an exception this one time."

"Ma'am?" Harry asked confounded and urging her to continue.

"Our House has spent a many great amount of years without a victory. It has been seventeen years since we last won the Quidditch Cup, and you'd have to look up in a history book the last time we won the House Cup. When you made it through the tryouts, the members of the Quidditch team were ecstatic and told me that you're a natural flier and that this year we really had a chance with

you in the team. None of them were happy with your punishment when they received the letters explaining the situation."

"I don't understand how I would be able to play. My father won't allow it. He kicked me out of the team."

"Your dorm mate, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, kindly pointed out a loophole in the school rules that would allow you to play. Only the Head of House or the Headmaster can kick someone out of the team, and even then, it has to be taken to the Board of Governors with a minimum of three days before the next match."

"The Board of Governors has to sanction a punishment before it's applied?" Harry asked out of curiosity.

"Only the drastic ones, such as expulsions, suspensions, removal from the Quidditch teams... Anything that goes beyond a normal detention or loss of House points has to be consulted with them. Anyway, your father explicitly told you wouldn't play anymore, but he didn't actually run it through me or Headmaster Dumbledore, and consequently the Board. The Captain and I have agreed on granting Mr. Finch-Fletchley the position. It won't be made official, but seeing your dorm mate in Quidditch practices in the role of seeker during Quidditch Practice should appease your father."

"I'm not sure I'm following you." Harry said feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"Harry, because I haven't sanctioned your expulsion, you're technically still in the team."

"That much I understood."

"What do you think your father would think if he sees you in a Quidditch practice after he banned you from playing? He'll check that his punishment was actually enforced."

"If he discovers it hasn't he'll go to Dumbledore to make sure I don't play." Harry said, understanding.

"And you know that I won't be able to do much against that should the situation arise."

"So what should we do? You want to make Justin attend the practices and then I will show up at the game and just play."

"Something like that. Until the day of the match you'll be attending the Quidditch practices disguised as Mr. Finch-Fletchey. Nobody will know you're actually Harry Potter, so your father will think his punishment has been enforced. Then the day of the match Mr. Finch-Fletchley will be sick or indisposed or whatever we can think of and you'll be able to play."

"My father will be furious." Harry said with a sly smile. "And it's probable he'll go to Dumbledore to make sure I'm kicked off the team after that."

"That's why we have to think of a suitable punishment for your actions. If you've already been serving detentions for weeks the Board of Governors won't punish you again for the same fault. Make no mistakes Mr. Potter, your actions at the Ball require punishment. I'm only agreeing to do this for our House' sake, so don't you dare disappoint me. At the end of the year I want that Quidditch Cup adorning our common room."

"Yes Ma'am. I won't let you down." he said confidently with a smile.

"Now, about your punishment..." Sprout said, making Harry's smile vanish.

.o0o.

WELL THAT'S ANOTHER RCHAPTER UP. SORRY FOR THE DELAY, BUT I'VE BEEN CAUGHT UP IN SOME OTHER THINGS. ANYWAY, THIS CHAPTER IS DIRECTED TO ALL PEOPLE WHO THROUGH THEIR REVIEWS HAVE EXPRESSED ME THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT HOW HARRY SHOULD GET AWAY FROM HIS PARENTS' GRIP. AS EXPLAINED HE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO GET EMANCIPATED BUT AT LEAST HE'LL HAVE AN ESCAPE ROUTE PLANNED ONCE THE SCHOOL YEAR ENDS. AND HE'LL BE GOING TO SEE NEVILLE SOON!

ANYWAY, I HOPED YOU LIKED JAMES BEING KICKED OUT. TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK.

:)

## Chapter 22: Plans Made

A lone figure stood in the darkness that the woods bordering the wizarding town of Hogsmeade provided. From his position, amidst the undergrowth of the forest, he had a favored view of the railway station, which stood only a few feet away. The heavy cloak he wore did little to shelter him from the light snow that was rapidly covering the area. It was nearly seven in the evening and it had been quite some time since the sun had set, causing the temperature to drop dramatically. His breath steamed in the cold air, and if it wasn't for the warming spells he had placed in all of his clothes before coming down here, he thought he wouldn't look much better than the very realistic looking snowman that stood at the side of the path that lead to the school. Maybe it is really someone who froze to death, he thought amusedly. What would he not give to see Karl frozen like so, or Dumbledore and his parents for that matter. Especially James. He deserved much more than being fired from Hogwarts after all he'd done.

The news of his replacement came out in the press even before he was told by Dumbledore or by the Board itself. The tantrum he threw was one of apocalyptic proportions. Harry was wise to avoid him until the end of the holidays. Perhaps he had cooled down by then. With Lily still there as a Professor, Dumbledore allowed James to stay at the castle, so ultimately nothing changed. The new Transfiguration teacher was appointed by the Ministry once Dumbledore failed to find a suitable replacement. Rumor had it that he had gone to McGonagall, begging for her to take back her post, but she, being the proud witch she was, had denied him, several times. Minister Fudge took matters into his own hands and decreed that one Mrs. Dolores Umbridge should fill in until the end of the year. Harry hoped she was better than his father. Transfiguration was an incredibly amazing subject if taught well.

It was a grueling half an hour before he heard the distant whistling noise of the train's steam engine, and another ten more minutes before the Hogwarts Express finally came into view and halted at the Hogsmeade Station, carrying dozens of excited students back to the school. The doors of the coaches opened a few seconds later and many people already attired with the Hogwarts uniform quickly made their way across the snow-covered station and towards the carriages.



Harry did the same and walked through the woods without being seen until he arrived to the thestral pulled carriages. He only had to wait for several minutes until the people he was waiting for showed up. The four Hufflepuffs were immersed in a discussion about their respective holidays and they didn't notice Harry tailing them until they all got into the first empty carriage they could find. The carriage took off as soon as the Hufflepuffs were aboard so Harry had to do a little sprint to get onboard too.

"What the-" Ernie Macmillan cursed loudly when the door to the carriage was suddenly opened as if by its own volition and a hooded figure joined them. Susan let out a small and frightened squeak and Justin withdrew his wand from his pocket immediately.

"Whoa! Whoa! It's me!" Harry said defensively lowering down his hood and raising his arms defensively. "It's Harry!" They all relaxed a bit and Justin lowered his wand with a sigh.

"Damn you Harry!" Ernie said annoyed and still a bit in shock. He smacked him lightly on the side of his head. "You prick! You scared the hell out of us."

"I'm glad to see you too Ernie." Harry responded amusedly. Surprisingly, ever since he had overheard his parents' scheme, he was happier rather than depressed, after all it meant that Neville had never abandoned him, and now he was determined to get to see him no matter what.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Susan asked. "Aren't you supposed to be at the school waiting for us?"

"It was the only way I would not be seen. I'm sorry I startled you." he said sincerely.

"Don't worry about it." Susan replied.

"I had to buy something at Hogsmeade," he explained showing them a little package. "so I sneaked out a little before the train arrived so I could get back to the school with you. It is difficult sneaking out of Hogwarts. This way I don't have to sneak back in and risk being caught."

"And what has gotten you in such a good mood?" Hannah asked out of curiosity. "I thought that after those letters..." she trailed off.

Harry shrugged. "Well for starters, and thanks to you Justin, I'm back in the team. Well still in it since I never left." Harry explained. He patted Justin in the shoulder with a smile.

"Congratulations Harry! Justin told us about his plan over the holidays." Hannah said hugging him while the others also congratulated him and celebrated the fact that they still had a chance in the Quidditch Cup.

"I can't believe Sprout actually agreed to it." Justin asked flabbergasted. "When I had the idea I owed Sprout without really thinking she would go along with it. It was nothing short of a gamble. In normal circumstances she doesn't tend to contest other teachers' punishments."

"She does, but these are no normal circumstances. And she does want the Cup badly." Harry told them. "She was right when she told me I would have to look in a history book for the last time Hufflepuff won something."

"It must have been like thirty or forty years." said Ernie. "My father was in Hufflepuff too and even then it had been some years since Hufflepuff's last victory."

"I'm sure we'll be able to bring it home." Justin said confidently. "The showcase in the common room has been untouched too long."

"Well, I will try my best." Harry said seriously. "I better if I want to stay in Sprout's good graces. She practically threatened me with a massive punishment if we didn't win."

"She must be really desperate." Susan observed.

"She's been standing for years the continuous bickering of the other Heads of House about whose team is better and who is going to win the Cup. It must get really old and annoying if you can't take part in it and be taken seriously." Ernie said.

"Well, after we kick Gryffindor's ass, she'll be able to." Hannah said happily.

"Anyway, that was only a part of the good news." Harry said taking a more serious tone. "You remember those letters I told you about? The ones that Neville wrote me?" They all nodded silently and Harry saw that Hannah flinched when he brought it up. Harry smiled sympathetically at her when she looked at him. The poor girl had assumed that as Neville hadn't written to her either, then he mustn't have been all that interested in her. It had been a big blow to her and had spent more than half the holidays brooding over it, until Susan came along to cheer her up. "Well it seems that Dumbledore has convinced my parents, and by extension Neville's grandmother, that I was really going Dark. Augusta Longbottom didn't want me poisoning his grandson's mind with my evil magic, so with Dumbledore's help, they fabricated those letters so we would stop trying to contact each other. It appears that Augusta controls Neville's mail and Dumbledore controls mine."

"So none of Neville's mail is getting past her grandmother?" Hannah asked, feeling really hopeful.

"Not a single letter." Harry assured her.

"That bastard!" Hannah cried.

"How do you know this?" Justin asked sounding genuinely curious.

"I overheard them." Harry said simply. He didn't think he should tell them about the Order. Only Ernie's parents and his were a part of it. "My parents were meeting with Dumbledore a few days ago at the school." he said carefully looking at Ernie. The Hufflepuff boy smiled, almost mockingly.

"Err... they know about the Order, Harry." he said. "I was at Justin's while my parents attended this one."

"Oh." Harry said dumbly and turning a light shade of pink. Fortunately it went unnoticed as it was quite dark inside the carriage. "I didn't think you would know." he said a bit nervously, thinking he may have offended them.

"It's quite okay Harry." Justin assured him. "We understand all that secrecy thing. If anyone were to inform You-Know-Who about its members, its plans..."

"I didn't suggest that any of you would-" Harry started to apologize again.

"We know Harry." Justin assured him again. "Don't worry about it."

"So how did you manage to overhear them?" Ernie asked with a mischievous smile. "Last summer they hosted one at home, just at the beginning of the summer when they were still recruiting many of their members. They all met at the dining room. I tried everything I could think of to listen to what they were discussing." he explained looking a bit frustrated even now. "Nothing worked though."

"I had the Weasley twins' help. Their mother insisted they came to the school too. She didn't want them alone at home, not now when Voldemort is back. They had brought a pair of extendable ears so we went to the classroom two floors above from where they were meeting and prayed they had at least one of the windows open. Luckily, we got lucky."

"You overheard all of it?" Ernie asked dumbfounded.

"No, not all of it, mostly the beginning though. After they talked about the fake letters I couldn't take it anymore and left. I must say that your parents weren't too amused about you befriending me." Harry told Ernie who snickered in return.

"They told me as much over the Christmas holidays. I told them that I only stick with you because you're Justin's friend so you tag along most of the time."

"Why thank you Ernie." Justin said sarcastically and genuinely annoyed. "Now it will be my parents pestering me about it."

"Oh don't be so melodramatic mate. Your parents are muggles, so I don't think anyone will bother to tell them about it." Ernie argued.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Hannah asked Harry. "Have you confronted your parents about it?"

"No!" Harry exclaimed as if she was mad. "They are going to let Neville come back to school as soon as they are sure we won't be friends anymore so I won't turn him dark again."

"So you're going to do nothing?"

"Best I can do is simply do nothing that my parents know about. No speaking out against them, no challenging them, absolutely not mocking them... I will convince them they have me under control, while I'll go ahead with my plan. As long as they think they are in charge, we're good. However if they discover me, they might not admit Neville back to the school for a long time in fear that we're still friends."

"So what does this plan of yours include?"

"I'm going to see Neville, no matter what. I expect he'll have received similar letters to the ones my parents fabricated. I hope he's cleverer than me, or has more faith in me than I had in him." he said bitterly, sounding really ashamed. "I'll go and visit him. I'll tell him about all that's going on and that he should make his grandmother believe that we're not friends anymore if he wants to come back soon."

"And how do you expect to go visit him without your parents noticing?"

"I have really no idea. But I was hoping you would help me there. Fred and George have already agreed to help me out."

"I'll help you in anything I can, as long as you let me come along." Hannah said firmly. Harry considered this briefly and after a few moments he nodded in agreement, though he thought that if it involved a greater risk than going alone, he'd ask her to stand down.

"How soon do you intend to go to his place?" Susan asked.

"As soon as possible. I was hoping next weekend, maybe Saturday. It would have to be really early in the morning so I can spend as much time as I can talking with him."

"Maybe we could meet sometime during this week to discuss different options." Hannah proposed. "You could have the twins come too."

"Where would we meet though?" Ernie asked. "We can't do it anywhere too public. Someone might overhear us."

"Our dorm would be the obvious choice but it would be against the rules for the twins to come too." Justin said in agreement with Ernie's prior assessment.

"Since when have rules stopped Fred and George Weasley?" Harry said with a smirk growing in his face. "I already have a perfect place guys."

After that they fell into a more comfortable conversation for the rest of the ride, in which they all discussed their different holidays. He felt several pangs of jealousy at the naturalness with which their parents loved and spoiled them. The four Hufflepuffs sympathized with Harry's practically present-less Christmas day, and they even tried to apologize for not getting him anything but the matter was settled when he reminded them that he hadn't gotten them nothing either.

When they arrived back to the school they blended easily into the crowd and thankfully Harry's presence went unnoticed to Filch, who was in charge of making sure no student was left behind.

.o0o.

James Potter's sacking didn't cause such an outrage as Karl Potter would have everyone believe. Everyone outside Gryffindor was happy that the unfair that point awarding policy James had followed to favor his own House had come to an end.

Three days into the week, however, the students were already starting to miss James Potter as Transfiguration teacher. The plump witch that the Ministry had appointed had them read through the textbook during the whole period and then expect a three foot essay on the subject the following day. It was said that she had been open to answering questions during her first periods, occupied by the first and second years, but when the older years came and therefore the complexity of the theory rose, she found herself incapable of understanding the students' questions and much less answering them. Such was the extent of her incompetence. After that questions couldn't be asked and anyone who disrupted the silence of her class would be rewarded with a detention with Filch. Even Harry found

himself wishing that she was fired too, though he didn't wish it so much as to pray that James was given his former position.

"Please, could someone explain me why do we have to put up with such crappy teachers." Ernie complained as they took their seats for dinner after their last class on Wednesday, which was, coincidentally, Transfiguration with Professor Umbitch, as Ernie had quickly dubbed her. "Potter wasn't a very good teacher either, no offence there Harry, but at least we could try transfiguring as we read on the subject. How could Dumbledore hire her?"

"Umbridge was appointed by the Ministry." Justin reminded him. "They overrode Dumbledore."

"Isn't the school supposed to be self-governing, without any Ministry interference whatsoever?"

"It is." Justin admitted.

"I wish McGonagall had taken up her old position." Harry said, feeling angry at Dumbledore for sacking McGonagall so his father could get a teaching position at the school. It had been an ill move on his part.

"I do too." Justin said.

"I don't miss her." Ernie replied. "Remember how strict she was?"

"Strict but fair." Justin said. "She never took off points for nonsense as Potter and Snape do, and she knew well the subject."

"Unlike my father."

"Hi guys!" Hannah said as she and Susan joined them at the table.

"We just heard that Wilkinson and Potter have broken up!" Susan said as she plopped down in the seat beside Ernie.

"Really?" Justin asked with a side-glance in Harry's direction.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Harry asked. Hannah raised her eyebrow and looked at him inquisitively.

"You had a fight over her with your brother." Ernie said, a bit untactfully.

"We weren't fighting over her. He was only picking a fight, that was what he was doing. And he got what he deserved in the end." Harry said acidly.

"So what are you going to do?" Hannah asked. "Are you going to-"

"I'm going to do nothing!" Harry declared. "I won't pursue any kind of relationship with her."

"Why won't you?"

"Why? Aside from the fact that she stayed away from me after all the bullshit was printed in the press, she's clearly not interested. And nor I am. She chose my brother over me, remember? I won't go around getting my brother's leftovers." Harry said angrily.

"Is that how you think of her?" Hannah asked softly. "As your brother's leftovers?"

"Can we just drop the matter?" Harry said exasperatedly. "Please!"

"All right." Hannah said in a tone that implied that she might bring up the topic again, and sooner rather than later. There was an awkward silence for a few minutes as they ate. Until Ernie broke it again.

"So, the meeting, Harry. Tell us about it." Ernie said quietly. That brought a smile back to Harry, who pushed all thoughts of Riley aside.

"Ok, here's how we're going to do it." Harry said. "I don't want us to leave in a big group with Dumbledore seeing us and thinking we are up to something. No, we'll leave in pairs and with a couple of minutes margin between us."

"All right." Justin said as Susan and Hannah echoed their agreement.

"Susan you'll go with Ernie first, then the twins, and finally us three." he told Justin and Hannah.



"So where should we head to?" Ernie asked with an eager expression.

The venue of the meeting was still a mystery that Harry had refused to disclose until the very last moment. Despite their discretion, Harry knew that all his partners in crime had been wondering and placing bets about where he was taking them to discuss ideas of how were Hannah and Harry going to get to Neville's house. So far, nobody had come even close.

Harry regarded him for a couple of seconds. "It's nowhere near the Forbidden Forest." he said. Ernie's confident and almost smug expression turned into a scowling one. "That's what you had bet on, right?"

"Yeah..." he said dejectedly.

"See? I told you he would never take us there. It is dangerous!" Susan said poking Ernie in the ribs.

"Tough luck mate." Justin quipped.

"I don't think you should celebrate too much Justin. You didn't get it right either. In fact none of you guessed correctly." Harry told them.

"Unless you have built a new room in the castle I don't see how we could all miss." Susan said. "I mean, we had covered all the possible places for a private meeting."

Harry smiled enigmatically at her. "Oh, you'll see..." he said.

"So where should we head to?" Justin asked.

"Ah, yes. Go to the seventh floor corridor, and wait for me beside the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls ballet."

"But there's nothing there." Ernie said.

"If there is do I win your bet?" Harry challenged him. Ernie shook his head. "Hmm, I didn't think so. Anyway, any time now guys." he told him and Susan.

They took the hint quick enough. They gathered their belongings and left. After a minute or so Harry looked discreetly towards the Gryffindor table and gave the twins a subtle nod. They stood up and left through the oak doors. Harry was pleased to observe that no-one was paying attention to them as he took off with Hannah and Justin after some more minutes.

Harry guided the two Hufflepuffs through a great number of shortcuts and concealed passageways they had never suspected that even existed. Hannah whined at not being told about these before and having lost great amount of time through the years going back and forth between the classrooms when she could have easily saved half the time if she had known about them. Thanks to these passageways, which Harry now knew by heart after having memorized the Map in its entirety, they managed to overtake Ernie and Susan on their way up.

"Oi!" Ernie complained as he saw them emerge from a 'normally' solid wall just a few feet in ahead of them in the seventh floor. "Where did you come from? How did you manage to get here before us?"

"Couldn't it be because you lovebirds made a few stops in your way up?" Justin asked wiggling his eyebrows. Ernie and Susan blushed profusely without looking at each other.

"We took a few shortcuts." Harry provided.

"You guys wouldn't imagine how much time we've lost coming and going to the classes." Hannah told them excitedly. "He knows a great number of very useful shortcuts, and some other very private places..." she said falling into a giggle when the couple blushed even a brighter shade of red.

"How did you know about all those?" Justin asked as they all started walking again towards their meeting point.

Harry sighed. "I guess I'll have to explain later. It is tale that needn't be overheard either."

"It took you long enough." one of the twins offered when the group rounded up the corner. The red headed twins were standing a few feet away from the tapestry.

"Please excuse Ernie and Susan, George," Harry said, not really knowing if it was him or his brother Fred. "but not everyone knows about Hogwarts' hidden secrets such as we do."

"Oh, we'll have to show you around then. Fred and I know each and every one of them passageways, as well as most of the schools' hidden places." George boasted.

"I doubt you know about everything Hogwarts has to offer." Harry said thinking about the Room.

"Oh, we would never dream about knowing about all of Hogwarts' secrets, Harry. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, it was right here were Fred and I once hid from Filch in a broom cupboard. Now though, it is nowhere to be seen."

Harry shrugged, barely containing his laugh. "Anyway, let's go! We don't have much time." Harry said enthusiastically. "To the Ancient Runes classroom!"

The group followed Harry dutifully. However, just when they had walked past the absurd tapestry, the raven haired boy in question stopped right in his tracks with a heavy frown in his features.

"Or maybe we could... it might be open, with luck..." he spoke to himself in a hushed tone that the others could barely hear. "Let's go to the Arithmancy classroom better." he told them, walking through them in the opposite direction of which they had come.

They regarded him with confused expressions and started to follow him again, only to see him stop again a few meters later, past the tapestry, and with the same thoughtful expression reigning on his face. Harry even scratched his chin to add some credibility to his comical act. Meanwhile he hadn't stopped thinking about the New York flat that he and Neville usually required the Room to transform into.

"Wait!" he said sharply as he halted suddenly. "I'm sorry, I didn't remember that there are always some students studying there after class." he told them as he passed again through them. There were a couple of looks that looked more irritated than confused at this stage. "To the Ancient Runes classroom it is then. Sorry!"

When he passed through the tapestry a third time, a highly polished door began to appear in the wall. Harry stopped again when he heard the faint noise it always made when it appeared.

"What now Harry?" Justin asked looking a bit impatient. "Harry, you said you had a place in mind."

Guys, will you look at this!" Ernie said awed as he had noticed the door. He was absolutely certain it wasn't there before.

"Behold the Room of Requirement." Harry declared proudly.

"The Room of Requirement?" Hannah asked. "What is it? And why wasn't it there before, because it was not there right?"

"It was most definitely not." Fred agreed. "Isn't this the exact spot in which that broom closet appeared?"

"I'm certain it was dear brother." George agreed.

"This is the place I had in mind for our meeting." Harry explained, looking at Justin. "It's an unplotable room that only appears when someone walks three times past the tapestry opposite of the concealed entrance. Whatever the seeker wishes the moment he walks past it three times, the Room provides. Hence it's name. It will provide you with anything you require."

"So all that indecisiveness before, not knowing which class to use..."

"I was only fooling around." Harry explained with a smile. "What would you have said if I start pacing back and forth without saying a word to you? You would've thought I've gone as barmy as Barnabas." he said pointing at the tapestry.

"So this is where you often disappeared to." George observed while opening the door and allowing Hannah and Susan to go in first.

Harry narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"We've seen you and Neville vanish from the Map many times while you were up here." he explained.

"What is this place?" Susan asked as she waltzed into the room. She stopped at the big windows and gazed down at New York's enormous buildings. "Is this actually what you were wishing the Room to turn into?"

"It's New York," Justin explained, recognizing the tall skyscrapers to be seen through the window. "one of the biggest cities in the world. Some call it the world's capital."

"These are great views." Hannah observed from the window. "How did you guys find this place?"

"A house elf from the kitchens was kind enough to show it to us on our third year. This place has become like a second home for me and Neville ever since. We always wish the Room to transform into this penthouse above the city. It's our refuge." he said while wishing a few more couches and a small tea table to appear. The others were astonished.

"What you wish, it will provide." Harry said. "Remember?"

"So how does it work? You just... wish it, as simple as that?" Susan asked.

"Sure, give it a try." Harry encouraged her. Ernie had already tried. He was holding a fat purse overflowing with Galleons. Harry laughed.

"It won't let you take anything out though." he told him chuckling. Ernie looked crestfallen.

"So why don't we get started?" Hannah suggested. She was as eager as Harry to see Neville.

Harry nodded in agreement and instructed the rest of them to take a seat around the small table he had conjured only seconds before.

"Okay, Susan and I spent yesterday night making a list with some ideas we came up with." she said taking out a piece of parchment out of her bag. "We didn't give them much thought so they might be unadvisable to carry out, but we felt we should at least have something to start with."

"Excellent." said Harry. He had some ideas of his own, and each one of them had a flaw, at least.

"So the first one in the list, Apparition." she read from the list. Then she looked up expectantly at the rest.

"I can't Apparate." Harry said at once. "We can't apparate yet Hannah. We're not adults." he said in a stating-the-obvious tone.

"We know that Harry." Susan drawled. "But Fred and George can."

"I thought it was Harry and Hannah we were trying to get to see Neville, not us." George said.

"We were thinking about side along apparition actually." Hannah said. Fred and George's eyes widened. Harry's too.

"That's a bad idea." Fred declared. "We don't have a license to side along, so it would be illegal."

"Not to mention the danger of trying it without any previous experience." George added. "Someone could get badly splinched."

"Portkeys are out of the question too, before anyone asks. You can only get one from the Ministry." Harry said.

"Okay. I guess I'll tick them both off then." Hannah said taking her quill, ready to cross the Apparition idea off the list.

"Definitely." Ernie agreed.

"Next?" Justin asked.

"The Knight Bus?" she proposed.

"Won't work either." George explained. "The Ministry would pick up the underage magic out of school and then they'd be in serious trouble."

"The Bus driver could easily recognize Harry too." Ernie added.

"Okay..." Hannah said crossing that one off the list too. "What about brooms?"

"I don't have a broom." Harry said.

"Neither do I." Hannah said.

"You could borrow from the school." Susan proposed.

"And be accused of theft if you are caught." Ernie said sarcastically.

"I don't think brooms are a good idea." said Justin. "How far is Neville's?" he asked Harry.

"Little less than 250 miles, I think." he replied. "He lives in Southern Wales."

"Even with a Firebolt you would need two hours to get there and two more to come back, leaving you with very little time at Neville's." Justin explained. "With normal brooms it would take a couple of hours or more added to the total."

"We should find a way to get there and back very quick. If Harry's parents realize he's not in the castle we should be able to warn him so he can get back before they finish searching the castle." Ernie said.

"Oh, they wouldn't bother searching the castle." Harry said. "George, show them the Map." George looked at him with an are-you-sure look and then took the blank piece of parchment out of his robes. He spoke the password and they all looked astonished at the brilliancy of the Map when he explained how it worked.

"We can only hope that they don't realize I've gone missing. I don't think they will care about looking for you, Hannah." Harry said.

"What other options do we have?" Justin asked Hannah.

"Those were all we could come up with." she replied.

"What about Thestrals?" Ernie proposed. "They are fast and are supposed to have a great sense of direction."

"They would be an option, if we could actually see them." Harry said. "It will be quite difficult to hold onto one if you can't."

They spent some more time discussing other possible options, discarding some such as muggle transportation, Floo or attempting to create an illegal portkey. They were all discarded for different reasons. It was the twins that came up with a plausible idea. They started to whisper among themselves while the rest debated other options.

"Guys!" Fred called, getting their attentions. "We think we may have the solution."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Before we start explaining you should know it would be dangerous, very dangerous."

"It involves human transfiguration." George added.

"You know how to do human transfiguration?" Ernie asked with a raised eyebrow.

"We're covering it right now with Umbridge." said Fred.

"Oh, that calms me down." Harry said sarcastically.

"What do you want to turn us into?" Hannah asked with a sense of humor.

"Letters." Fred said brightly. "Harry, you've told us time and time again what a clever owl Hedwig is. We could turn you into letters directed to Neville and send you with Hedwig."

"Owls get very fast to their destinations. You could send a letter from London early in the morning and it would be here way before noon. Let's not forget that London is more than 350 miles away." George added. "They can move really fast."

"What if Augusta Longbottom has Owl wards that redirect all letters to her? What if she strips said letters down?" Justin said looking skeptical. This was a very dangerous plan. Harry didn't like the possibility of being torn by half. He wondered for a moment if it would be similar to splinching himself.



"Human transfiguration is too dangerous." Susan said looking very worried. "I think that seeing Neville doesn't warrant putting your lives at risk."

"You're right." one of the twins agreed. "It is a really foolish and dangerous plan."

"It was the best plan we had." Harry said looking a bit disappointed.

Justin looked thoughtful for a moment before he spoke. "Speaking of owls... How do you reckon they travel so fast anyway?"

"That's because they're magical animals." Ernie explained as if it was obvious.

"There's no such thing as a magical owl." Susan said. "I did an assignment on Owls for Care of Magical Creatures. The only reason they travel so fast it's not because they can fly at great speed, it's because some wizard back in the middle-ages set up a series of portals in key places of Britain. Owls only have to pass through them and they appear in another portal near their destination. It could be tenths or thousands of miles away." she explained. Harry looked really thoughtful after this.

"Where are these portals situated?" Harry asked her.

Susan sighed. "I know what you're thinking Harry, and I'll tell you now. It won't work. The portals are situated very high in the sky, and even if you managed to reach them, they are quite small. You wouldn't be able to go through flying in a broom."

Harry smirked. "Would another type of bird be able pass through?"

"I think so." she said slowly, wondering what Harry was on about.

"What are you thinking Harry?" Justin asked. He did not like the look in Harry's face, not one bit.

Harry didn't respond at first. He stayed silent thinking of possible drawbacks to his plan, a plan that Hannah wouldn't like. No, she wouldn't like it at all. And he would have to disclose his Animagus ability to them... Then, making up his mind he faced the group again.

"I think I should show you something guys. I will need you to promise you won't tell a soul out of this room about it all right? It's kind of illegal." he said.

"We won't tell anybody Harry. You can trust us." Hannah said softly.

He sighed. "All right, since the end of last year I have been practicing to become Animagus."

"No way!" Ernie said sounding very impressed and excited.

"But that's illegal." Susan said at the same time sounding very worried.

"That's why you have to keep it to yourselves." Harry said very clearly looking at her and then shifting his gaze to the others. "Or else the Ministry might find out and issue a fine I cannot pay."

"Tell us your form already!" Fred urged him good-naturedly.

"Do you want me to tell you or would you rather see it?"

He stood up and transformed into Horus. To say that they were all incredibly amazed is an understatement. He flew by around them, enjoying the awed looks of his new group of friends. The girls wanted to pet him and he happily obliged. However, when he saw George taking out his wand, no doubt planning to prank him in some way, he gave him a not so lightly peck in the ear. The redhead swore loudly and tried to smack Harry, but he flew out of his reach.

Once he reverted back to his human form he was bombarded with the usual array of questions and compliments. Harry, that was awesome! Harry, you're a beautiful bird! Harry, which type of bird is it? Harry, how much time did you need before getting it right? Harry, does it hurt when you transform? Harry, is it comfortable to have feathers? Harry, is it awesome to fly as a real bird? Harry, is it... He answered them all with as much patience he could muster until Hannah asked the one question he hoped she didn't ask.

"That hurt Harry." George told him as he rubbed his ear.

"Be thankful that I didn't take a chunk off, or defecate all over you." Harry teased him.

"Harry, you need to teach us!" Fred said.

"Definitely!" his twin agreed.

"Sure anytime." Harry said.

"I wonder what we would turn into." one of them said with a dreamy look.

"My bet? A pair of parrots." Harry supplied making everyone laugh.

"No." Hannah said. "I'd rather go for a pair of orangutans." Everybody laughed harder at the mental image.

"Do we even know if we'll both turn into the same animal?" George asked, mostly looking at Harry.

"Dunno." he replied. "If my brother wasn't such a jackass perhaps I would ask him."

"Harry is Neville an Animagus too?" Hannah asked him. He hesitated, and it was all it took her to realize Neville was one too.

"And what animal does he change into?" she asked.

"I'm not really sure I should tell you that Hannah. Neville might be mad at me for divulging he's an Animagus. Besides, he told me he wanted to tell you personally." Harry lied. Neville had never voiced such wishes, but Harry guessed it was exactly what he would have wanted. "It was his secret to tell. I've already divulged part of it. Let him tell you what's left." Hannah nodded reluctantly, feeling touched by Neville's words.

"So I assume that you want to fly there, right?" Justin asked, bringing them back to topic.

"Yes, through the owls' portals." Harry replied with a confident smile.

"It is risky." George commented. "We do not know if you'll be able to go through unharmed. It was designed for owls after all."

"Worse thing that can happen is that it doesn't allow me to go through and I rebound of it."

"You might not rebound. What if it knocks you unconscious? I don't know what altitudes we're talking about here, but I think that enough to crack your skull open if you fall." George insisted.

"Well it's the only plausible plan we have." Harry argued. He leaned back on his couch crossing his arms and looking annoyed.

"How will you find those portals anyway?" Justin asked.

"I hadn't thought of that." he said sheepishly.

"There you have the flaw in the 'only plausible plan we have'." said George quoting him. Harry looked at him annoyed. His plan had seemed so brilliant.

"You could follow an owl." Ernie said suddenly. "You send Hedwig with a letter addressed to Neville. Then you follow her closely."

"Won't Hedwig get scared of a falcon tailing her?" Susan asked.

"Hedwig knows it's me. We've flown together before. I think Ernie's right. Apart from the possible impossibility to go through these portals, it's the perfect plan." he said with a wide grin.

"Except that I won't be able to go." Hannah said feeling upset. Harry fell silent as he realized he hadn't thought about that.

"It's the best plan we have Hannah." Harry tried to explain some seconds later. "The others are too risky, you know that. I could carry any message you want." he told her.

"You should consider what you want to put in the letter Hedwig will carry." Fred said breaking the silence.

"It doesn't matter Fred." Harry said. "It's only so I can follow her and get to Neville's house without getting lost."

"I think it does matter." the redhead said. "If you reach him it won't, all right. But what if you do not reach him? What kind of letter will

Neville receive? One full of hate as your parents would like you to do so?"

"He's right." Justin agreed. "If he hasn't received any fake letter where you break your friendship, imagine how devastating it would be for Neville."

"I need not imagine that Justin." Harry told him sourly. "I've been through it remember?"

"We know." he said sympathetically.

"You do have a point, I admit. However, I can't write him a happy letter either. I don't have any doubt that Augusta would tell Dumbledore about it. Then all my I-am-mad-at-Neville-act would be fruitless and it could be a very long time before we see him back at school."

"I think you should risk it and send the letter full of hate as Justin said. Best case scenario, you make it and can explain in advance. I'm sure that a letter like that will reach him." Ernie told him.

"And worse case?" Harry asked.

"He receives it and he hates you. Then he hates you some more and eventually Dumbledore allows him back into the school. We'll be able to explain everything then."

"He would be very mad at me when he came back." Harry observed.

"But at least he would be back." Hannah said softly.

After some more short lived arguments and lengthy discussions, they agreed to carry on with that plan. Hannah and George weren't too happy about it though. The Hufflepuff girl was upset she couldn't go and George was still concerned about what would actually happen when Harry attempted to go through those owl portals. Many things could go wrong at that point. He could be knocked unconscious and fall, he could get trapped in one of those forever, he might get through and appear where he wasn't supposed to thus getting lost... Magic was complicated, and many weird things could happen to him. No matter what, Fred still thought it was dangerous, perhaps more than his plan involving human transfiguration.

It was accorded that Harry would make for Neville's house very early on Saturday morning. It wasn't likely that Neville would have classes on a Saturday. The night before, they would take Hedwig to the boy's dorm room and they would fly off at dusk, so no-one could see Hedwig leave.

Ernie and Susan's owls would be left on standby; ready to deliver Harry a message written beforehand to alert him in case his James and Lily found out he was not in the castle.

## Chapter 25: Longbottom Manor

Harry was having a nice dream for the first time in what it felt like years. All that had gone wrong in the past weeks hadn't. He was laying outside in the grounds, a few meters off the shore of the Black Lake, enjoying a gorgeous sunset with Riley beside him. She had her head in his lap and was holding his hand. Unfortunately, as all things good, it came to an end far too quickly for his liking.

Someone, or something, was poking him in the ribs, and then tapping him lightly in the forehead. He groaned loudly and flapped his arms over his head trying to bat away whatever was bothering him. He felt his hand impact with something limp, followed by a grunt and a loud noise.

He sat up from his bed promptly, startled by the noise. He was wide awake now. Ernie was on the floor scowling at him and Justin was rolling with laughter in his bed.

"I was only trying to wake you up you moron!" Ernie complained from the floor.

Harry looked at him bewildered. His eyelids were still feeling heavy. "Ernie? Did I just hit you?"

"Of course you did!" he protested from the floor.

"Sorry there mate. I was just... forget it. I'm sorry." he said helping him up. "Which time is it?"

"It's a little past six o'clock. Sun rises in an hour." Justin supplied. "You better be gone by then."

Harry laid back into his bed and stayed there for a few seconds with his eyes closed. Then he sighed and got up and headed to the shower. When he came out he dressed up with tons of clothes that would help shelter him from the elements during his journey. Over the holidays he had found out that the clothes he wore continued to shelter him in his bird form despite their disappearance during the transformation. He decided to add some heating charms as well just in case. If it was already incredibly chilly in the school, he could not begin to imagine how much worse it would be at higher altitudes. and with winter winds too, probably.

Shortly after he was finished dressing up there was two faint knocks at their door, just loud enough for them to hear. Ernie walked to the door and paused beside it pressing his ear to it.

"Did someone just knock or was it one of you making noise?" he asked, not hearing anyone at the other side.

"Open up. It must be Susan and Hannah. They wanted to wish him luck." Justin explained.

"And Hannah still has to give me his letter for Neville." Harry added.

True enough Hannah and Susan were waiting outside when Ernie opened the door. He beckoned Hannah in but spent a bit more time saying good morning to his girlfriend.

"Good morning Hannah." Harry greeted her as she entered the room. "Do you have the letter?"

She smiled at him and handed him an envelope. "Here. I hope he gets to read it."

"Don't worry. I'll get there safely and hand it to him personally."

"Thanks Harry." she said enveloping him in a hug. "Good luck!"

"Thanks."

"Harry?" said Susan as she and Ernie came to stand at his side. "I just wanted to wish you good luck."

"Thanks Susan. I appreciate it."

His dorm mates wished him good luck too, and after he had secured Hannah's letter, and the mysterious object he had purchased at Hogsmeade almost one week ago, he walked to the window and started petting his owl.

"Well, I guess this is it then." he said uneasily. He had never flown such a great distance before, not to mention the extreme conditions he may face during the journey and the possible wind currents he could be subjected to at high altitudes.



He attached the letter to Hedwig's talon and quietly instructed her to deliver it to Neville. Immediately after she took off Harry transformed. He glanced a last time at his friends and then took off after her.

.o0o.

It was not hard to follow her despite the low visibility at the first stages of the flight. The gifted vision of the falcons made it an easy task. However, when the sun rose, he made a note to fly slightly lower than her. It was easier to make her out against the blue of the sky than against the snow covered mountains.

Not long after, he spotted another bird. It was a barn owl and it was flying west of them. The three of them seemed to be in a collision course. He closed the distance with Hedwig, guessing the portal was near. His guess came true when a few meters ahead of them a third owl suddenly appeared out of nowhere with a quiet bang and flew past them as if nothing had happened. The barn owl flew into the same spot and disappeared.

Harry grew nervous then. The most dangerous point of his journey was right ahead, and now that he was faced with it, he wondered how it worked. What did he have to do to go through? Did he have to concentrate on following Hedwig? Did he have to concentrate on his destination? Did he have to concentrate on Neville? Did he have to concentrate at all?

He didn't have time to ponder over it anymore as they were already upon it. He closed his eyes and tried to think of his destination, of Neville's house. He felt a similar sensation to side along apparition, as if being squeezed into a considerably narrower tube than you.

Then the feeling was gone and he felt the air on his face again. Soon he realised that he wasn't a bird anymore. He was falling into the fields below him. He panicked and screamed frantically, waving his featherless human arms. 'Damn! I must have transformed back into his human form when I went through!' was the only coherent thought that crossed his mind. 'I should transform back and be done with it.' would have been a more helpful thought.

However he didn't think about that and continued to fall. Fortunately, the change came as a natural instinct and soon his arms had

feathers and his nose and mouth had been replaced by a curved and sharp beak. He sighed, if birds could actually do that, and gave thanks to all that was holy for not allowing him to continue to fall into a sure death.

Disoriented, he had a look around. He had lost sight of Hedwig during the stress of the fall where was anything anymore. Fortunately Hedwig hadn't gone very far. She was a few yards from above him, flying around in circles as if waiting for him. He flew there as fast as it was possible for a falcon, weary that Hedwig would disappear into another of those portals before he could reach her.

.o0o.

Neville cheered inwardly when he received Peter's owl during breakfast and read that he wouldn't be able to make it to today's class. Yes, classes in Saturdays. One of home schooling's perks; shorter classes, but six times a week. Classes with Peter were always boring, unchallenging and most things Neville knew already. The classes with Sirius were the real deal. Despite him saying otherwise, he made quite a good teacher, even through their mirror.

When he finished his breakfast he went back to his room, wondering what he could do today given that he had a free day. He wasn't allowed into the grounds as part of Augusta's punishment, so he was confined indoors. His room was the only place his grandmother would live him alone. Elsewhere, she might try to drag him into Light vs Dark, Good against Evil speech, and frankly he was fed up of that. Augusta tried every single time during meals and that was more than he could take.

He closed the door behind him when he entered, and then he collapsed into his bed wondering what to do. He had already completed his Animagus transformation, and though he loved to run, jump, sleep and play in his wolf form, he wasn't in the mood right now. Right now he could do with a little conversation with Sirius, but unfortunately he wasn't back from wherever he had disappeared to. He had tried the night before and the mirror would continue to reflect his own face instead of Sirius' appearing.

A tap on the window of his private balcony interrupted his thoughts. He turned his head towards it, and there, as if nothing had

happened was Harry grinning at him like an idiot. He got up from his bed and opened the glass door.

"Neville!" his friend greeted him enthusiastically.

He received a punch in his jaw in return that sent him crashing down. Harry brought up his hand to it and retired it at once. It ached like hell.

"How dare you come here!" Neville hissed at him. "You've come to gloat have you?"

"Neville... what are you doing mate?" Harry asked confusedly from the floor.

"What are you doing? Showing up at my house like this, as if nothing had happened..." he said in a hurt voice.

"And what has happened?" Harry asked carefully. Had Neville received a fake letter too?

"You stole Hannah while I was away!" he yelled. Harry flinched. He couldn't be seen here, and Neville's yells would his grandmother. "You took her to the Ball!" Neville continued.

"Oh." Harry said. 'So that's the problem. I took Hannah to the Ball.'

"Oh..." Neville repeated full of scorn. "You had no right! You knew I loved her!"

"Loved her?" Harry asked surprised. "I thought it wasn't that serious."

"Of course it was! I've been in love with her since the time I laid eyes upon her!"

"Neville, I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"I should have known." Neville said shaking his head and laughing lightly. "You always go after the scraps your brother leaves behind."

Harry was now standing and didn't lose a moment to punch Neville back. He didn't fall as Harry had, he had been expecting it.

"Get out." Neville said quietly as he cupped his nose.

"I'm not going anywhere until you've listened to me you lousy prat." Harry said coming to face him. "I wasn't even planning on going to the Ball. The Weasley twins threatened to drag me there even if I didn't have a partner. Justin told me Hannah didn't have a partner yet and that a seventh year was asking her every hour. We decided to go as friends and that's it. And guess why she had turned down everyone that asked her? She was devastated that you weren't there to take her."

"Not so devastated if she allowed you to slip your tongue into her mouth in mid-dance." he replied acidly.

"What are you talking about? We never... I never kissed her. I don't like her. You know that."

"Well you told me differently in your letter." Neville shot back. "Or have you forgotten?"

"My letter? Oh..." he said finally understanding what had happened here.

"You remember now don't you? You see, that's the most important thing to remember about lies. Remember what you tell everybody or else slip up and you'll be caught."

"Neville, I swear to you I didn't write that letter."

"Oh come on! It was signed as Horus. At first I didn't want to believe it, but who else would know about our nicknames?"

"Dumbledore." Harry told him. "He used Legilimency on me remember?"

"I remember too well. And look where it got me."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry about that. I really appreciate what you did."

"And you snogging Hannah is what I get in return."

"Come on Neville!" Harry barked. "I already told you that I didn't write that letter so forget anything it said! Do you think that after robbing Hannah from you and sending a hurtful letter I would come all the way from the school to see how you had taken the news? Take a look at this!" he said getting out a piece of parchment out of his robes and tossing it towards him. "Read it." he instructed him.

Grudgingly, Neville did as was told and unfolded the parchment. He took a seat and started to read. It was a letter to Harry. He started reading. At first it didn't make sense to him, but at the same time a foreboding and guilty sensation engulfed him. When he arrived at the end of the letter, his suspicion was confirmed. It was signed as Sox, but the letter had not been written by him.

"I never wrote this." he said looking up.

"I know." Harry said crossing the room and sitting beside him. "At the Ball, Karl and I had a little incident involving my knuckles and his nose." Neville snorted at this. A good sign, Harry thought. "My parents dragged me to their quarters and after they accused me of many things, they showed me four more letters just like this. I was devastated. They told me they had been saving them because they didn't want me to suffer. I spent my worst Christmas of my life. Then the Weasley twins came by. There was an Order Meeting and we eavesdropped in it."

"You overheard an entire Order Meeting?" Neville said incredulous.

"No, not all of it." said Harry. "I only heard what I needed to know. Apparently, Dumbledore thinks I'm a very dark and evil wizard, something related to my Aura I think. They thought I was going to convert you, or poison your mind or something like that. That's why they expelled you, to keep us apart. Your Grandmother would intercept your mail while Dumbledore would do the same with mine. I don't know about you, but since all of this bullshit began I must have written at least ten letters to you."

"I did too. I wasn't receiving any news from the castle. I didn't even know if you had woken up."

"Well, our stubbornness didn't bode well for them, so they decided to fake these letters so we would stop contacting each other."

"I can't believe they would do this." Neville said.

"I couldn't too, until I overheard it all." Harry said bitterly. "But then again, this is Dumbledore we're talking about."

"So Hannah and you did not..."

"No." he said with a smile. His broken nose made him flinch with pain.

"Oops. Does it hurt too much?" Neville said feeling guilty.

"A bit." Harry said.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have punched you, and I said some pretty mean things too." he said ashamed.

"Don't worry, I punched you too. We're even."

"I'll go fetch a pain relief potion from the stores at the kitchen." Neville told him getting up. "Wait here."

Harry was going to protest but Neville was already gone.

.oOo.

When Neville climbed up the stairs with the vial filled with potion in his hands he froze immediately. He quickly slipped the vial into his pocket when he saw his grandmother emerge from his own room and looking confused and irritated. Had she seen him hide the pain relief potion? Had she caught Harry?

"Grandma?" she asked tentatively.

"Oh, there you are Neville."

"What were you doing in my room?"

"I thought I heard voices and quite a ruckus up here when I was having my shower. I came to see what was going on."

"Oh, I was just... practicing. Given that Pettigrew isn't coming today I thought I'd go through the spells he taught me." The lie came easily enough to him and Augusta believed it without a second thought.

"I'm pleased that you're getting along fine. And it's Professor Pettigrew, Neville, not Peter. I certainly raised you better than that."

"Sorry Grandma. It won't happen again, and I'll try to be quieter from now on." he said respectfully.

"Ok, carry on." she said heading down to the ground floor, muttering to herself all the way.

Neville entered his room rapidly and closed the door behind him. He leaned against it and left out a sigh he'd been holding. Shortly after, Harry landed in his falcon form in his bed, and then transformed back.

"Nearly caught me." he said with a hint of amusement hidden beneath his relieved look. "I had to jump out of the balcony. I nearly crashed before being able to transform."

"She says she heard some noise. I fooled her telling her I was practising what Pettigrew has been teaching me."

"Peter Pettigrew is your tutor?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yeah, that was Sirius' reaction too." he said smiling.

"So you've been talking to Sirius? How is he? What is he doing?" Harry asked eagerly.

"He's fine. He's out of the country now and left the mirror behind so I can't contact him just now." he said almost apologetically. He could imagine Harry yearning to talk with his Godfather once again.

"My mirror was smashed when Karl sneaked up on me." Harry told him with equal parts of regret, anger and sadness.

Neville nodded knowingly. "Sirius was pissed when he found out about the restraining order."

"Yeah, I read the news. It helped me quite a lot." Harry admitted.

"That was what we intended when I suggested he went to the Prophet to give an interview."

"It was your idea? You don't know how much it helped me. I thought that both of you were ignoring me for some reason."

"Well I'm glad that it helped. And it got your father sacked too by the looks of it." Neville said, lightening up the mood a bit.

"The substitute teacher is even worse. Umbridge... Umbitch, as Ernie calls her." Harry explained making Neville chuckle. "She's been appointed by the Ministry and doesn't know a thing about Transfiguration. Still, I enjoy not having my father lecture me about Animagus transformations."

"What about the Hufflepuffs?" Neville asked. "Are you getting along with them?"

"Justin and Hannah mostly. Ernie and Susan too, but they spend together most of their time so I don't know them as well. Fred and George have been very supportive too. When I woke up after the attack I had partial memory loss. Imagine, first I'm going to the Library to meet the Hufflepuffs and do some homework, and then I wake up and I've been tagged as the next Dark Lord."

"They told you what really happened, didn't they?" Neville asked him.

"Yeah, but my mother got to me first and had the balls to tell me that I had messed up with a really powerful dark spell and that I had been knocked out."

"And how did she explain my expulsion?"

"She told me that you attacked Dumbledore while he was healing me. Thankfully our new friends told me what had really happened."

"So tell me about this incident between Karl and your fists." Neville asked with a reassuring smile. Harry chuckled and unconsciously he rubbed his fists.

"Well I've told you I went with Hannah, right? Ernie and Susan-"



"They went together." Neville assumed with a smile.

"Not only they went together, but got together."

"Really?" asked Neville happily. "That was about time."

"Justin went with some girl that turned out to be a pain in the ass. She actually started to lecture me about the bond of friendship between brothers, or something like that. The nerve of that girl... Anyway, we started to dance and the band called for a series of swaps between partners. At first it wasn't too bad. I danced with Susan and Angelina Johnson. Then it became all too awkward. I had to pair up with Granger. She didn't say a thing at all. It was plain obvious that she didn't like me in any way possible. Perhaps, not even as a human being. Then there was another swap and I got paired up with Riley."

"That's good right?" he said wriggling his eyebrows.

"No, it was not. She had been reading the press and was unsure about me, about my alleged darkness. The first days after I woke up she wouldn't talk to me at all. She agreed to go as Karl's date to the Ball." Neville's face darkened instantly.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I'm already over her. Apparently she dumped him a few days ago." he said unconvincingly.

"Why doesn't it surprise me?" Neville asked rethorically.

"So anyway, halfway through the song we were dancing, Karl decides to throw a tantrum. He says I had been waiting around for her, hoping for a dance. We exchanged some more unpleasant words and then he said that I was taking Hannah from my best friend and that you wouldn't know because my mail didn't get to you. I went mad at that point and started punching him in the face until someone stunned me."

"I'd love to see that."

"I'll show you the memory sometime. When they woke me up I was in my parents' quarters where they accused me of being dark again

and showed me the fake letters. I swear that after that, it was the worst Christmas ever. All the schoolwork I had to catch up with kept me from thinking too much about it, the animagus transformations too."

"The Animagus? How far along are you?" he asked eager to discuss the topic.

"I'm halfway through the second one. It is clear that I'm a panther, a black one." he told him while transforming his arms and legs into paws.

"Impressive." Neville complimented. "I've finished my single form already." he told him proudly.

"Let's see it then."

Neville stepped into to floor and transformed effortlessly. He started to show off and then to annoy Harry. When the raven haired wizard had enough he transformed too and flew just high enough so Sox wouldn't get him.

"Oi, that's cheating!" Neville complained when he transformed back.

"No it's not." Harry said smacking him lightly in the back of his head.

"I was wondering how you came here." Neville commented after they were seated again.

"Don't remind me about it." Harry said remembering the tense moments of his fall. "I flew all the way following Hedwig. She's carrying a letter for you by the way; it was the only way to follow her here. If said letter actually gets to you keep in mind what we've talked today and that I've written what Dumbledore wanted me to write."

"At what hour did you leave Hogwarts?"

"A while before seven. Why?"

"You flew more than two hundred miles in little more than an hour?" he asked incredulously.

"Yeah. Normal owls do it."

"They do." Neville admitted, feeling confused. He had never questioned the ability of his own owl to do the same journey Harry had done and in the same time.

"They have a special way of travelling. In the skies, there are a series of portals all over Britain that owls use to teleport from one place to another. I transformed back to human when I went past it. It was quite a scare to realize that I wasn't a bird anymore."

Neville chuckled softly imagining the scene. "I can imagine."

"Well it was a better plan than the one Fred and George were proposing."

"Which was?"

"Transfiguring me and Hannah into letters and tie us to Hedwig. I wonder what would have happened if we went back to human hanging from Hedwig's talon..." Harry trailed off with a thoughtful look.

"Hannah wanted to come?" Neville asked.

"Yes. We discussed lots of plans for us to get here. This plan was the only one that could work, but only I could come then." Neville looked sad at this news. She would have liked to have Hannah here. "But she gave me this for you." Harry added quickly, giving him Hannah's letter. "Go on read it. I'll go fly around for a while. You read it and write her back if you must. I will give it to her tonight."

"Thanks mate." Neville told him as Harry transformed into Horus and flew off to give him some privacy.

## Chapter 26: Ginny

Azkaban was situated even farther north than the north-most point of the Scottish mainland. It consisted of a tower only, as high as the highest tower Hogwarts had and as wide as the chunk of rock it stood on in the middle of nowhere in the frosty North Sea. The invariable presence of Dementors guarding the prison kept it in a perpetual state of fog and low temperatures that would break the will of the toughest man.

The human personnel of the prison took care of the upper part of the tower, far above the fog, where the sun still shone on and one wouldn't get wet on a stormy day. There were the low security cells, for inmates who had short sentences or important friends. Their cells were spacious and had big windows, with iron bars on them to prevent any thoughts of escape. A comfortable enough bed sat at one corner and the inmates would be allowed an hour outside their cell every day.

The lower levels were left to for the Dementors to guard. The most dangerous prisoners were kept here, in the high security cells. Almost everybody here had been condemned to a life sentence. Or several. The great majority of them were mass murderers, terrorists, psychopaths and rapists, and nowadays most of them were followers of the Dark Lord Voldemort. They were kept in sub-human conditions. No prison guard enjoyed coming down here, the Dementors' territory, so they came only when they must. Therefore the prisoners were fed at random times and were lucky if the gaoler took a second to check on their health and state of mind.

The one foot wide by three feet long windows had iron bars in them and often they let the sea water through when there was a storm and the waves crashed against the prison walls. In the lowest levels flooded cells were not unheard of, and neither were premature deaths of the prisoners. Many had died in these cells over the years. Some died starved, others froze to death, some drowned and many died from illnesses that would have been easily cured if the guards actually cared. And those were the lucky ones. The rest of them had to endure the Dementors' presence and its renowned side-effects for the rest of their miserable lives. Most people went crazy only at the thought of it.

In one of these cells however, there was one prisoner that was neither a murderer, a terrorist, a psychopath or a rapist. Prisoner n° XY390 had been here for more than three years now, wrongfully accused and imprisoned. She didn't even have a trial in which to defend her innocence. Her original fiery red hair inherited from her father had turned into a dirty brown due to the lack of hygiene over the few years she had been locked up in here. Back then it had reached her shoulders in a tidy fashion. Now it fell below far below her waist in an untidy manner. It was rancid and greasy. Her body was that of a fourteen year old, starting to develop into womanhood, but mentally, she was still the same innocent, scared and confused little girl she was when she was thrown in here halfway through her first year at Hogwarts.

As she sensed the Dementors pass beside her cell, her worst and most bitter memories came back to her mind. She shivered, closed her eyes with might and pulled close the filthy blanket that she had been using since she had arrived here. It was as messy and dirty as she was, but it gave her a sense of safety to have it wrapped around her. It didn't make the memories go away though.

She remembered with dread what he had felt when a full squadron of Aurors had seized her from the Gryffindor Common Room at school one afternoon. It had been just after telling Dumbledore everything about the diary and her suspicions about her being the one that was setting the monster on the students. Her family had always revered the Headmaster, and that blind trust in the old wizard had been easily rubbed on her. Now, amidst all her confusion, there was one thing she was certain about. Dumbledore was not to be trusted.

## Flashback

Ginny Weasley was a bundle of nerves as she walked alone the halls of Hogwarts on her way to the first class of the day. She fidgeted nervously as she pondered on her precarious situation. Her memory was becoming even more erratic. She had woken up the day before, and as had happened several other times since the start of the year, she had no recollection about when she had gone to sleep, or why had she slept in her Hogwarts robes instead of her pyjamas. The last thing she remembered about all those times, was talking to Tom through the diary.

The first time this had happened, she had woken up with blood on her hands and robes. She thought it to be a cruel prank at the time, until she lost her memory again, and again. Five more times it had happened, including yesterday, and every time a student had been petrified. The last one had been Hermione Granger, the friend of his brother and the Boy-Who-Lived.

Ginny feared she was the culprit, or at least somehow linked to the attacks. It didn't make sense, but the timing matched and whenever the topic of the attacks was brought up, which happened continually in classes and meals, she felt an enormous and irrational pang of guilt overwhelm her. She also had a strange feeling that attracted her to the diary she had found. Its presence calmed her down and she had taken to keep it near her at all times. Unfortunately, after Penelope Clearwater was attacked one day in which she Ginny had lost her memory again, the diary disappeared. She was mad when she didn't find it and lashed out at her dorm mates thinking they had stolen it to make fun of her. Oddly enough, she felt relieved too, as if a weight had been removed from her shoulders.

During the following month after that, her mood lightened up. She apologized to her dorm mates and it all became good again. She didn't feel the need for Tom to comfort her anymore and stopped looking for her missing diary. Then, unexpectedly, one afternoon she saw her missing diary in the hands of the Boy-Who-Lived, Karl Potter.

Ginny had had a crush of apocalyptic proportions on him during most of her life. It had come all crashing down the first time she got into the Hogwarts Express. She had tried to sit down with him and her brother, but Karl had shooed her away in a very unpleasant and uppity manner.

Then, Harry Potter made his appearance. He and Neville allowed her to sit with them after she had been turned away from almost all compartments. She hadn't bothered to ask Fred and George, thinking they might shoo her away as Ron and Karl had done. Instead, Harry and Neville had helped her with her trunk and talked to her about Hogwarts. Ginny hadn't talked much to Harry throughout the years despite the Potters had visited the Weasleys frequently and vice versa. She realized her mistake then, for Harry was all she had thought Karl would be. She decided to befriend him no matter which House she was sorted in. Sadly, the first morning

when she openly waved at him from the Gryffindor table, Ron and Karl noticed this and lectured little Ginny about suitable friends. Harry and Neville were not among them. It was the end of their friendship and the reason why Ginny started to write in the diary that had appeared among her books. A parting gift from her mother, she had figured.

When she saw the diary stacked with Karl Potter's pile of textbooks she felt the attraction again. She felt the need to write in it once more. It was an irrational feeling that led her to break into the second year male dorm during one Quidditch match and steal it from him. Karl didn't seem to notice it was missing though. He did throw quite a tantrum when he found 'his' room dishevelled though.

That same night, Ginny wrote to Tom again. She woke up the following morning not remembering what had happened. The diary was missing again. She walked with a sense of dread to breakfast. There she learned that another student had been attacked, but not just any student. This time the victim was Hermione Granger.

Now, a day after that, she was determined to tell someone about it. She couldn't go to Percy, or Ron. They would ignore her, especially Percy. She had caught him snogging Penelope Clearwater in a broom closet some days ago. Ginny thought about going to the twins, they would understand and support her no matter what, but they were nowhere to be found. She didn't want to explain this in a letter to her parents, it was too difficult to explain, so that only left Dumbledore. Surely he would understand. He had seemed kind and affectionate every time he came by the Burrow or Potter Manor.

When she reached the stone gargoyle she had a sudden attack of panic and nearly ran back to her room, but it passed soon enough. With as much courage as she could muster, she asked the gargoyle to see Dumbledore. After some seconds the statue moved aside and Dumbledore came down in his bright purple robes.

"Miss Weasley, good evening." he said kindly. Ginny did not answer and nodded faintly in acknowledgement. Dumbledore looked at her with worry. "What brings you here? Is anything wrong, dear?"

Ginny spoke after a few seconds of fidgeting with her shoes. "I think I may know something about the attacks." she said in a frightened tone and not looking up. Dumbledore perked up instantly.

"Come into my office, Miss Weasley. Tell me everything."

The Headmaster led her into his office and told her to sit down in one of the two chairs before his table.

"Tea? Perhaps to calm your nerves a bit?" he asked politely.

Ginny nodded shyly and Dumbledore walked to a table at the other side of the chamber, where a kettle full of tea was always ready along with a small basket full of lemon drops. Giving his back to the Gryffindor girl, he pulled out two cups and filled them considerably. He turned for a brief moment and looked at Ginny. Making sure she didn't look, he produced a small vial filled with a transparent liquid from his robes and poured one drop in the girl's drink, enough to loosen her tongue, and two drops short of being illegal. The unauthorized use of Veritaserum was punishable by law, but the law was thought for grown people which would only give into the effects after three drops. Therefore using one or two drops was perfectly legal and gave the same results in a little girl as three drops in an adult.

He returned back to the table and handed her the spiked cup. He told her to drink it, claiming it would help her calm down a bit. Only when she was more than halfway through her drink Dumbledore allowed her to begin. Ginny didn't know where to begin and was starting to doubt if it had been such a good idea to come to the Head Office.

"I think I have a problem with my memory." she said quietly at last.

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked. "Are you talking about school tests? You have problems remembering your notes?" What did that have to do with the attacks? He thought.

"No, it's not that." she said. "What I mean is that I have sometimes woken up in the morning not remembering what I had done the night before."

Dumbledore frowned. "You mean like blackouts?"

"Yes." she said in a monotone voice. The serum was in full effect and compelled her to give yes and no answers.



"I see." Dumbledore said slowly. "Perhaps you should have gone to Madam Pomfrey from the beginning, because I can't see how any of this is related to the attacks." he said dismissively.

"But Sir, you don't understand." she said with a sense of urgency that made Dumbledore pay full attention to her again. "The first time it happened, I thought it had been one of Fred and George's pranks." she explained.

"Probably." Dumbledore agreed quietly with a trace of amusement in his voice. "This has happened more than one time?"

"Yes sir. Every time I woke up not remembering the night before, a student was attacked. The first time it happened I woke up with dried blood in my hands and robes. Every time the students talk about it I have an unexplainable feeling of guilt. Tommy told me there's no way it has been me, but I think that it's too much of a coincidence that at exactly the same dates I have a blackout there's an attack."

Now Dumbledore was watching her very closely and with calculating eyes. The Veritaserum ensured this was a truthful story and not some kind of joke. He still didn't understand the details. It was clear that Ginny Weasley was closely linked to the attacks. Further questioning would make him understand in which way, and then, if he manoeuvred correctly he could maybe manipulate the Boy-Who-Lived into playing the hero and save the school only with him at his side ready to save his ass the last moment, very much the way it had happened the year before with Quirrell. It had been a huge boost in popularity for the Potter family and himself.

"Who's Tommy?" he asked quietly, intending to find out all he could before the dose ran out. "I don't recall any student with that name. Which house is he in?"

"Oh it's no-one. Just my diary." she said timidly. Her father had told her more than once not to trust anything that could think for itself if you couldn't see where it kept its brain.

"Your diary has a name?" Dumbledore asked her a tad confused.

"It wasn't mine in the first place. I found it the first day here at the school in between my books. I wrote in it and he told me his name

was Tom. He didn't like me calling him Tommy." she said as an afterthought.

Dumbledore frowned. "You know that you should have turned that in the moment you find it, don't you Miss Weasley. It may have been cursed or jinxed."

"I know. I asked my brother Percy to check it and he said it was all right. Then I went to Madam Pince to give it to her thinking it may have come from the library, but she told me that no-one had reported a missing diary and that she didn't know of anyone called Tom Marvolo Riddle, so I kept it."

Dumbledore went pale and wide eyed, and his heart skipped a bit. He took off his glasses and rubbed his long and crooked nose. As he did so he said in a sceptical manner: "I'm sorry Miss Weasley. Did you actually say that you are in possession of Tom Marvolo Riddle's diary?"

"Yes. Well, not anymore." she said sounding very frightened all of a sudden. Had she done wrong to keep a stranger's diary? Percy had say it was ok. "Have I done something wrong?" she asked worried.

"No. Not at all." Dumbledore assured her after regaining his composure. "Where is the diary now?" he asked urgently.

"I don't know." Ginny said. She was in the verge of tears. "Yesterday I woke up without memory again. The diary wasn't in my bedside table anymore and Hermione Granger had been attacked."

"Don't you have any idea of where it might be?" the Headmaster asked anxiously.

Ginny thought for a moment, trying to recall the events. But she could not. "I can't remember."

Dumbledore sighed, leaned back in his chair and stayed silent for a moment. From the look in his eyes it could be told that he was thinking very hard. Finally he spoke again.

"Thank you for coming to me with this Miss Weasley. Go back to your common room and wait for me there. I may have a need of you

to find the Chamber." he said rapidly. Then he turned to his fireplace and threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fire.

As Ginny walked back to the Gryffindor common room she thought that Dumbledore had dismissed her in a very rude manner, as if he was in a hurry. Not the way she would have expected after listening to her mother's praises about him. Anyhow, she did as she had been told and went back to Gryffindor Tower.

When she got there she sat down in one of the armchairs near the fire feeling really nervous and wondering about what was going to happen next. She was sure that Dumbledore would make the attacks stop, well, after she showed him where the Chamber was. She didn't know where it was, but she was sure that the old wizard would be able to find a way. But what would happen after that? Would it be known that it was she that was opening the Chamber? Was it really her or just a coincidence? What would people think of her if it wasn't? She felt a headache forming in her head. She leaned back and tried to relax a bit and not think about it.

After a while, when she had nearly fallen asleep the entrance of the common room was opened a bit violently. She looked up and saw the Karl and her brother Ron come in. Ron looked incredibly angry and was being held by Karl, as a dog in a leash, she thought. She noted that they remained standing by the door silently and that Ron avoided looking at her.

She started to feel something was wrong. Really, really wrong.

The portrait cricked as it was opened again. James Potter came in and the noise in the common room quieted down suddenly. Behind him three more men plus Dumbledore entered. Apart from Dumbledore, all of them wore Auror robes. Ginny felt relieved. The Headmaster was bringing in the Aurors and they would be going into the Chamber to dispose of the monster. She made to stand up and go speak with Dumbledore.

But then Mr. Potter pointed at her with a repulsive expression. Her glance shifted at Ron who was looking at her too, hatred all written over his face. Karl was smiling smugly. In three long strides the three Aurors crossed the distance between them. Two of them placed magical bonds on her hands while the other one read aloud the arrest warrant for opening the Chamber of Secrets and the

attempt of multiple murders. Her wand was taken from her and handed to James Potter. He snapped it in front of her. Meanwhile Dumbledore watched from the background.

James Potter stayed behind to talk to Dumbledore while the Aurors dragged her out of the school amidst her endless crying and yelling. Everyone saw the scene as they escorted her to the edge of the wards so that they could apparate. At one point, near the Entrance Hall, Fred and George emerged from a secret passage and met the procession. They dropped everything they had just bought from Hogsmeade and walked towards the Aurors. They stood on their way.

"Move." one of them commanded gruffly. The other two fingered their wands.

"Why are you taking her?" George asked looking murderous.

"She opened the Chamber of Secrets. She nearly killed lots of students."

"She's innocent." Fred claimed.

The Auror on Ginny's right looked at him smugly. "Of course she is."

"She's not going anywhere." said George taking out his wand. Fred mirrored his move.

"You don't want to do that." the Auror said. "Want to join her in Azkaban?"

The twins advanced on the Aurors with their wands drawn.

End Flashback

The memory stopped abruptly. They were gone, the Dementors were gone, but it wouldn't be long before they came back. They always came back and made her relive the memory of her imprisonment. Thankfully this time she hadn't seen her brothers get heavily injured. Thankfully, as the Aurors hadn't sustained any damage, no charges were pressed and they were let off with an incredible amount of detentions and a fine. She didn't have the same luck.

She lay back in the hard stone bed her cell was equipped with and tried to get some sleep until the Dementors came back. With luck it would be more than a couple hours' sleep. She was falling into an uneasy sleep when a loud thundering noise was heard outside. 'Great another storm...' she thought miserably keeping her eyes shut. She was about to get very wet, as the cell she was in was situated at the base of the tower and more often than not the waves came in through her window. But she didn't mind. She was used to it by now. It would be cold though.

A second bang clangoured throughout the prison. This time it sounded everywhere around her and felt solid chunks of something fly about the cell. Fortunately, her sad replacement of a bed was near the door, and far from the exterior wall, which was now mostly gone, as well as part of the one that separated her cell from the next. Chunks of rock, big and small, littered the floor. Ginny stood up and tiptoed carefully between them and neared her missing wall. She saw the sea for the first time since she had been imprisoned. She had never reached the window while she was here. She was too small.

She gazed into the distance and after a moment she spotted some silhouettes in the fog. First there were a couple, then three or four more joined them, then some more came until there were many. As they approached nearer she saw they were flying in brooms. An opportunity to get out of here! She started waving madly at them, hoping one of them would get her out of her cell. Three brooms veered to come her way. She started to wave more enthusiastically.

Then she stopped abruptly, because as she looked closer she saw their robes. They were of a distinctive shade of black and all of them wore masks. Death Eaters! The stories her parents had told Ginny and her brothers about them travelled through her mind in a hurry, making her remember the most horrible aspects about them. She backed away in fear as the three Death Eaters landed in her cell. On her haste she stumbled over a piece of rock and fall down on her back. One of them was taller than the other two, who were only average in height. The tall one looked as if was the leader of the other two. His long blonde hair could not be hidden with the mask only. He let out an angry growl when she saw Ginny sitting in a corner utterly terrified.

"This is not Bellatrix Lestrange." one of the short ones observed dumbly.

"That's because this isn't her cell." the tall one told them angrily. "You missed. Check the adjoining cells. Quick! She has to be around here somewhere." he commanded. Then he turned to Ginny again.

"And who are you?" he asked curiously after looking at her for some time. "What a terrible thing you must have done to end up here so young."

Ginny tried to get away but she found herself pressed against the wall. The tall Death Eater raised his regal looking cane and brushed aside the locks covering her face.

"Ginny Weasley." he observed a little impressed. "I thought you would be dead by now. I was sad to learn that Dumbledore had found the culprit before the task could be completed."

The Death Eater that had went to fetch Bellatrix Lestrange came back. "Malfoy."

"Don't speak my name you idiot!" he hissed at him as he hit his face with his cane. "What do you think these masks are for?"

Then Lucius turned to the newcomer, Bellatrix Lestrange. She had been a prominent pureblood once, rich and beautiful. Now, after years lacking proper hygiene, her hair had turned gray, and her eyes missed the mischievous touch about them and seemed devoid of any life. Lucius dragged her some feet away so they could speak quietly for a second.

"Bella, it warms my heart to see you free again." he said kindly as he bowed slightly, respecting the expected pureblood traditions.

"It's been a long time Lucius."

"Indeed." he agreed. "The Dark Lord is most anxious to see you."

"Let's not keep him waiting then." she said in a raspy voice.

"You." Lucius called to one of the two Death Eaters. "Take her on your broom." he said signalling to Bellatrix.

"What about the girl?" the other asked.

"We're taking her back with us." Lucius Malfoy said after a little thought. "The lads have been locked up in here far too long. I'm sure they'll appreciate a little entertainment." he said. Ginny didn't understand what he meant by that, but his smile was enough to make her tremble.

Chp27